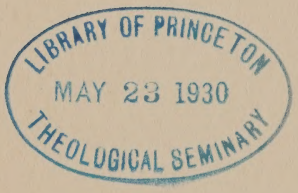
SPIRITUAL GROWTH

J. I. KNAP



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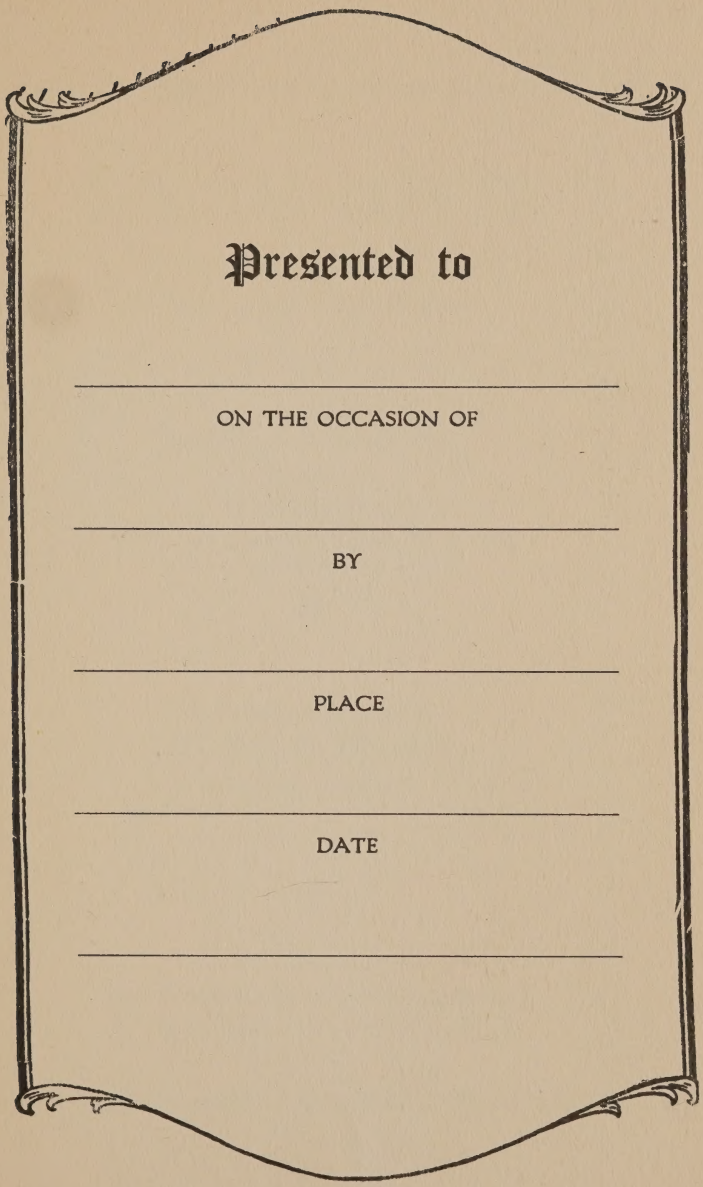

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SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A Series of Studies on Experiential Christianity

BY

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INTRODUCTION

THIS is a book on experiential religion.

It has been written by the Rev. J. J. Knap of Groningen, the Netherlands. The Rev. Knap is a minister in the Established Church, and a leader of the orthodox wing. He is a voluminous writer, whose works are tinged with Biblical mysticism.

In this book he is treating the life of the Christian from the viewpoint of experience. He gives expositions of the Word of God in such a way that the reader can at once see its import for practical daily life. He strongly emphasizes personal devotion. He states that "the influence of the Church rises or falls with the inner power of its members." That is why he urges the preachers of the Gospel to be preachers of the WORD. He says, "Whoever parades his erudition, or advocates his private views, gives stones instead of bread. They may be precious stones, glittering diamonds, but a finely attuned soul spurns all that glory and glitter for a single morsel of the bread of life."

He therefore urges us to a life of prayer. But he does not waste his energies in scolding the children of God, as so many writers do. He encourages them. He shows how all the experiences of life are used by our great Potter to make a beautiful vessel from common clay.

As we would expect, his chapter on Our Suffering is unusually rich. He shows that seriousness is not somberness and pessimism. "On the contrary, many cross-bearers go through life with a shining face. That is because they are independent of external joys, since they have a fountain of happiness within, which at times illuminates their faces."

We would recommend this book to those who have made confession of Christ as their Savior and Lord. It will teach them in simple language what real Christianity is. It is also a fine book for those who are confined to their homes. And in our busy America it will be well to give heed to the statement: "The Kingdom of God is not a noisy factory, but a quiet garden."

A book as this automatically makes us practise the presence of God. And that is experiential Christianity at its best.

THE TRANSLATOR.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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Present Day Conditions

I

PRESENT DAY CONDITIONS

IT is no doubt fitting that we begin a book that shall deal with spiritual growth, with an article on present day conditions. Let us put our hand in our own bosom first.

We cannot escape the demand for such an investigation when we look with a clear eye at the conditions of the world, the Church, and the individual believer. Then there is much in all three spheres that fills us with foreboding. Of course, we may not close our eyes to the things that are good and encouraging. On the contrary, we must thank our God for the blessings which He gives to our people, to our churches, and to their membership by His grace. But no matter how much we may appreciate the good we may see, and praise the Name of God for it, there remains more than one phenomenon that causes us to be apprehensive of the future, and brings the old question to our minds: "When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on earth?"

First of all we mentioned the world.

From the nature of the case we do not look for

spiritual life, in the Scriptural meaning of that word, in the world round about us. The natural man does not understand the things of God. They are foolishness to him, and he cannot comprehend them, because they must be spiritually apprehended. The new religious movements that are at present going through the world, and which are a reaction against the materialism of a former generation, do not disprove the above statement. They do prove that humankind again feels the need of higher things, which can not be met with material goods, with knowledge or science.

But the world is not stretching out its hands to the Bread of Life in these days when hunger is gnawing at its vitals. It does not accept the food that came down from heaven in Christ to bring life eternal to men. It is going on paths of its own choosing to quiet its hunger, and therefore the word of the Lord to Nicodemus remains true: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be BORN AGAIN, he cannot see the kingdom of God!"

Besides, the newer religious movements pass by the great mass of men. In general the life of the world does not reveal improvement. Rather can we speak of an increasing degeneration. The home is no longer what it was in a former day when national life was strongly influenced by Christianity,

and unconsciously elevated by it. Honor and obedience for parental authority are on the wane. The recklessness of a coming generation has become almost proverbial. A generation is being raised that casts aside all authority in civil and moral life.

When the fear of God is gone, life becomes chaotic. Then there is no respect for the parents, for the government, for the community, for work and duty. Finally men and women sin without restraint. They follow the evil desires of their hearts and are continually seeking new thrills in ever baser amusements, and then all the seriousness of life is hopelessly gone.

We have no desire to generalize.

We are willing to admit at once that, owing to God's common grace, there are still many groups in society that hold fast to traditional morality; that cultivate their duties as citizens; and that have love and respect for the parental home, and even strive after noble ideals. There are still many who are seeking beautiful pearls, even though they are carelessly passing by the Pearl of great price.

Yet the statement will be hardly contradicted that the level of social life is not rising, but is sinking. There is even a rather swift descent. We see many symptoms that bring to mind the words:

"And he that is unrighteous, let him do unrighteousness still."

And what must we say of the Church of the Lord?

In various denominations the Church is taking its place in a world as we have sketched above. It would be contemptible ingratitude to ignore the blessings that the church in the course of time has brought to our people. We are not trying to praise ourselves. But that does not mean that we must therefore be silent. The Word of God, which the church is bringing in the home and in the Bible classes, in Christian and parochial schools, and which is preached from the pulpit week after week, can not return void, but must do all that for which the Lord has sent it.

Humanly speaking our people would soon be deprived of the knowledge of the truth, if the gospel no longer gave its joyful sound. Statistics can not give an adequate idea of what the church means for national life. But the history of the world plainly shows that those lands, which were blessed with the gospel, stand on a much higher plane than the others. Science flourishes, arts develop, and culture has a finer texture in Christian lands. And, most important, thousands walk in the way of salvation.

We may not underestimate the work of missions, by which heathendom is elevated from its low estate and blessed with the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Saviour. In addition, a wide and deep stream of Christian charity flows from beneath the threshold of the churches, through which the sick are aided, the weak protected, and the fallen raised up with the help of God. The influence of the church is even felt in social life and in the legislation of the country. Who would not honor the church for these many blessings?

We are not blind therefore to the vitality of the church.

But if the church puts its hand in its own bosom it will be the first to admit that there are still many leprous spots. There may be members here and there who have no eye for the faults that exist in the church, and who think in selfsatisfaction that the church today realizes the ideal pictured in the Scriptures,— all who look beneath the surface complain of an undeniable worldlimindedness, especially among the members of a younger generation, so that the lines that separate church and world are removed.

The word of the apostle: "love not the world, nor the things of the world," may not have lost its authority for all, but has lost it for many. They

feel attracted to the customs of the world. And if prayer and watchfulness decline there is danger that they lose their first love and return to the world's way of living.

Closely connected with this love of the world is a shallow formalism in Christian life. The external obligations of church life are minutely observed. In this the members of the church will distinguish themselves from the world. But if we do not serve God with our whole heart, our church life becomes a formalism over which Christ has pronounced his woe. By making spiritual things a matter of formality, we gradually glide into a phariseeism in which there is always an element of hypocrisy.

The real cause of these phenomena lies in a lack of PERSONAL spiritual life.

Our spiritual life often lacks in depth. Then we no longer desire to study the Scriptures, which alone can make us wise unto salvation. We have an aversion to books that demand close attention. The greatest problems must be solved for us on a single page, if we are to read about them at all. And that secret communion with God, that puts a holy sheen over life, you will seek in vain with such superficial souls.

Our personal life is of such exceeding importance.

This is the narrowest and most intimate circle about which the larger circles of church and world concentrate themselves.

But for that very reason every one who confesses the Name of the Lord should put his hand in his own bosom and examine himself. For in its essence the church is the communion of all Christian believers. That is why the church cannot be better than the individual disciples. The church is duty bound to be a blessing to the world. But how can she be, if her members have no growing, energetic spiritual life? The influence of the church in the world rises or falls with the inner power of its members. The energizing Spirit, from whom a renewing power goes out upon the world through the preaching of the Word, does not live in temples made with hands, but in living hearts which are woven together with the strands of faith and love.

Let each one therefore first examine himself.

The following chapters are meant to aid in this self-examination. No doubt they will reveal to us some defects in our spiritual life, but they will also show the way to spiritual development. Our evil times need men and women who are the salt of the earth, pithy, purifying, preserving salt. "But if the salt has lost its savor, wherewith can it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men."

A New Creature

II

A NEW CREATURE

AN examination of the spiritual growth of the individual believers is based on the supposition that a beginning of spiritual life is present in their hearts. No growth is possible without life.

We must therefore, at least casually, face the question as to the source, the character, and the revelation of this new life.

The Word of God plainly gives us the source of spiritual life, and explains it as far as this is possible. It contradicts the general opinion that we have this spiritual life from the day of our birth. Those who cherish this opinion are willing to admit that this spiritual life does not at once shine forth in full glory. They will even admit that it seems to be lacking altogether because so many find their interests in worldy affairs, and have no thought for the higher and heavenly things. But then they add that the spark of spiritual life lies hid under the love to the world and sin, as the embers of a fire may lie hid beneath the ashes. What is needed is simply this, that the coals are stirred

and fanned again, and the fire will blaze forth anew.

This idea ignores the bitter seriousness of the fall of man. Man's fall did not just do some damage to his communion with God, but broke it completely. And that is why the spiritual life that came from that communion was not but weakened a little. It is gone. The original life of man has been replaced by death through the catastrophic crisis in Paradise. Paul reminds the church at Ephesus of its previous sinful state in these words: "And you did he make alive, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins, wherein ye once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the powers of the air, of the spirit that now worketh in the sons of disobedience."

Nothing less than creative omnipotence is necessary to restore the lost spiritual life. And the creation of life is the crown-right of God, which He lets no one take from Him. All the efforts of the men of science to create life in dead matter have been in vain. God alone has the power to produce life, whether it be life in plant, animal, or man. And He alone can bring true spiritual life in the heart of a sinner so that he is born anew, now not for this world, but for the Kingdom of heaven.

God does this through the quickening Spirit.

Since we are rational creatures endowed with mind, heart, and will, the Holy Spirit usually brings about this new life in a rational way. In the case of adults at least, He uses the Word of God. Especially the preaching of the Word, even though quiet study and meditation are not excluded. Therefore Paul rightly asks: "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?"

Through the preaching of the Word the Holy Spirit enlightens the darkened mind so that we come to know our guilt, and seek the righteousness of Christ. He renews us, and changes our unfeeling hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, which are susceptible to higher influences. And he bends the corrupt will, which of itself desires nought but evil, and changes it into a good will, so that we strive after sanctification, without which no man can see God.

We can say but little more however concerning the origin of spiritual life. The source of all life is a mystery which no one can fathom. That is therefore also true of the birth of spiritual life. Jesus compared it to the mysterious wind of which we

hear the sound without being able to say whence it comes and whither it goes. We only know through whom, and in what way, the life that is born of God is wrought in our soul. But its beginning is an unfathomable mystery. When this new life is there however, and we are born again, we can testify to its existence in holy adoration and joyful thanksgiving to Him who spake and it was done. We gladly assent to the testimony of Paul: "Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new." II Cor. 5.

And what is the CHARACTER of this new life?

Do not let the statement of Paul about a new creature lead you astray. If this text were the only statement about your new life, you might conclude that the old personality with which you were born, would be completely destroyed with your new birth, and replaced with a new personality.

But you must ever compare Scripture with Scripture.

If you take the Bible as a whole you will find that the word "new" in this case means "renewed." You do not become another person through the work of the Holy Spirit. You remain the same person with your personal characteristics, gifts, talents, and whatever else may distinguish you from

your neighbor. God has not only created you, but has formed you into the being that you are. And how would He destroy His own work and change you into another being? God respects His own work, for what He has made is good. Only sin has corrupted His creatures.

The work of the Spirit does not consist therefore in bringing forth something that did not yet exist. It is a RE-creation of your nature. All the innate characteristics that you had with your birth remain, but they are purified of their sinful tendencies. You are not therefore born a second time as if a new person were created, but you are born AGAIN, and your individual faculties are sanctified, and led in a new direction.

The musician and the painter do not see their talents tarnish with this renewing work of the Spirit. When a man crosses the threshold of the Kingdom of God he does not become a person who has been robbed of his native abilities. His talents remain inviolate and may even develop to a higher plane in the pure atmosphere of grace. But the sinful trait that formerly tainted them because he served himself, his art, and the world of sin, has been removed. He now uses all his powers to the glory of God.

The gifted thinker likewise keeps his honorable

place in the temple of science. He loses nothing of his innate ability to think, but now makes his thinking subject to the obedience of Christ.

The man of initiative remains the same energetic personality, but now places his energy in the service of Christ's cause, and will soon be appreciated as a man who completes his every task to a finish. The woman of tender affections does not become a loveless creature with regeneration, but now has the right channels through which her mercy can flow for the welfare of the neighbor and the extension of the Kingdom of Christ.

Regeneration does not bring loss, but gain.

We can see this from the MANIFESTATIONS of this new life.

No matter how deeply this new life may lie hidden in the depths of our soul, it cannot remain hidden either to ourselves or to our fellow man. It reveals itself to our own consciousness in a complete change of inclinations. A principle of love towards God and the neighbor now develops while we formerly sought only our own advantage with a cold egoism. The world of our thoughts, which formerly revolved about the axis of our "ego," has now been placed on another hub. Our life now revolves about Christ, who has so exceed-

ingly loved us, and is worthy to be served by us till our latest breath.

Our affections no longer yearn for the things that are base, common and unholy, but seek the things that can elevate us from everything that is mean and low, and bring us nearer to God.

We also feel a great need of prayer. Our new life often brings us to our knees to place all our needs and cares, and also the sins that still beset us, before the throne of grace. Through this secret fellowship with God our judgment is sanctified, our taste purified, and our whole personality is refined . . . Our inward life receives the mark of the nobility of the children of God.

Naturally this new life also manifests itself in an external way. Not only in keeping our external religious obligations, or in the confession of our lips. For that is possible even though no spark of new life glows in the soul, just as the bells in a church tower can toll and give sweet music, as if they were living beings instead of dead objects put into action from without.

From within must come the impulse to read the Bible, to hear the Word of God preached, and to confess His Name. Only then can these outward manifestations be a sign of an inward change. But then there must also be a daily walking in the

light as children of the resurrection. We must humbly follow Christ on all the paths that run through life. We must obediently bear the burdens the Lord lays upon us. We must bow before His will which is always holy, wise and good. We must seek the things that are above, where Christ is at the right hand of God. In a word, within and without, our life must find its center in Christ, so that we can repeat the words of the apostle: "I live; yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me!"

Growing Life

III

GROWING LIFE

THE new life, which the Lord creates in the human heart through regeneration, reveals itself in conversion.

In a certain sense you can say that conversion takes place in a single moment. For there is a definite moment in your life when you turn your back to the world and turn your face to the new Jerusalem.

But that does not give a full description of this crisis in your life. Jesus did indeed describe this transition into the kingdom of God with the figure of the strait gate . . . . Just a step, just a moment, and you have crossed the threshold. But in the same sentence he speaks of a narrow WAY. And you know that we do not complete a walk on a path in a moment, but gradually, till we come to the end.

According to this statement of Jesus, conversion is both a crisis that is finished in a moment, and a gradual process that covers all the years of our life. Or, to use more common terms, the first, fundamental conversion must develop into the sec-

ond, the daily conversion. We once turn to God for the first time. But since sin still works in the regenerated heart we must turn to God again and again. We must daily die to sin, crucify our flesh in communion with Christ, mortify our members that are upon earth, and try with all our energies to attain sanctification as a prize. That is the second, the daily conversion.

This continual process is the growth of the new life that is born of God. You can not open your Bible or you will read of this spiritual growth. Now it is put before the believers as a divine demand. Then as a mark of grace. And then again as a great promise of God. The Scriptures speak of children, youths, men, and fathers in Christ. They admonish you to grow in the grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. They speak of the first principles which we must leave behind at a certain stage in our spiritual life in order that we may attain perfection. They command you to give the easily digested milk to new-born babes in the kingdom of heaven, but to give solid food to the adults. They urge you to go from strength to strength till you shall appear before God in Sion. And how rich is not the promise given to the church, and thereby to every individual believer: "I will be as the dew unto Israel; he shall blossom

as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the grain, and blossom as the vine. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive-tree, and his smell as Lebanon." Hos. 14:5, 6.

The ideal given in these words would be beyond our reach if this growth were dependent on our own power. Fortunately that is not the case. As the origin of new life, so also its development is a GIFT. The words of Hosea intimate this. And it is stated still more plainly in the words of the psalmist: "The righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree: He shall grow like the cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of Jehovah; they shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and green: to show that Jehovah is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him." Ps. 92.

Only a growing life is real life.

When God creates life He begins with a minute germ. But in those seeds he lays a power by which they can shoot forth, and after a certain period, develop in glory. God works altogether differently with his inanimate creatures. Sun, moon, and stars have been made with a single deed of power and

were finished at once. Throughout the centuries nothing has been added or subtracted from them. As far as the naked eye can see they are still the same as ages ago, and have not gone through a period of development that has caused their light-giving power to gradually increase. You notice the same unchangeableness with the hills and mountains, the deserts and the oceans. Though the rocks may slowly erode with the weather, and a catastrophe may level the hills; though the winds may blow away some desert sands, and the oceans be subject to volcanic outbursts, these manifestations are not wrought by a growth from within, but by action from without.

In His living creation, God works organically.

When you have a little mustard seed in the palm of your hand you do not even feel that you are carrying anything. But the Creator lets this little germ develop into a tree in whose branches the birds of the air can nestle and sing.

Similar conditions prevail in the animal realm. The growling lion with its bold head and heavy manes lies hidden in the cell in which its life begins. And how insignificant is the embryo of the mighty eagle that courses through the skies! And in the marvellous world of human-kind you find the same quiet development. How great is not the

distance between the infant in its mother's arms and the genial thinker whose pregnant ideas enrich the world!

What is true of our natural life is also true of our spiritual life. The beginning is exceeding small when God puts new life in the soul. That new life is not full-grown when we receive it from our Maker, but needs time to develop and grow. Greater than the distance between the infant on its mother's breast and the genius, is the distance between the man who is just converted and the man who shall one day stand before the Lord without spot and without wrinkle.

God's ways are higher than our ways.

If our hand is skillful and is guided by a fine mind we can also bring forth beautiful things. But our work is quite different from that of God. An able architect, who has the outline of a beautiful temple in his mind, and draws it on paper, will know how to realize his ideal with the necessary building materials. But these building materials must be brought from all sides. The temple must be put together. Measuring, carpentry and masonry are necessary before the monumental edifice is complete.

How much more majestic is the work of God! He does not build up your spiritual life with

much noise, but lets it grow in quiet. He follows the organic line of gradual growth. As the green bud develops into the royal rose, so he lets your spiritual life slowly develop till it is ripe. This growth lasts all your earthly existence and will reach its apex in eternity in the crown of life.

In the natural world there is a LAW of growth.

The word "law" teaches us that if anything actually lives it must grow, that is, if the process is normal, and is not checked by circumstances that hinder proper development. Such a law is also found in spiritual growth. If the germ is there it will develop as the mighty oak develops from the small acorn. This is a harmonious development. All the parts of our new life share in it equally. Mind, heart, will and conscience, all our faculties, are subject to this inward force of growth. That keeps our growth well balanced. The one faculty will not check the growth of the other.

Of course, this harmonious development is often hindered by disturbing factors. The sin that besets us, and all kinds of external circumstances, may hinder the perfect development of the law of growth. The growth may be warped. There may be a pining away. But this does not nullify the truth that the law of growth itself is righteous, holy and good.

Man builds with stone after stone.
God on the other hand makes things grow.
Man builds by adding from without .
God causes growth from within.

This growth is not as that found in caves where, after some years, it seems that the stalactites and the stalagmites have grown. This seeming growth is caused by chemical action. This is building, though it may appear like growing. But the growth of spiritual life in man is always from within. God is the one who giveth the increase.

We do not say this to encourage spiritual laziness. Then men are satisfied with the development they have attained, and at best take a waiting attitude to see whether the Lord will bring growth to the life that He has wrought. We may not so wait. We must use the means God has given to ripen us for eternity.

Working Out Our Salvation

IV

WORKING OUT OUR SALVATION

EVERY one is convinced that it is necessary to use appropriate means for the development of our physical life.

We do not let a day old infant to its own resources for we know that the spark of its life would soon be quenched. Every mother knows instinctively that the new-born infant needs food and drink to strengthen its delicate life. It also needs continual care. It must be protected from contagious diseases. And every symptom that indicates some indisposition is carefully watched.

Besides, the child needs light, but warm clothing. The home is kept at a moderate temperature. In a word, everything is provided that may be conducive to good, healthy growth of the little body. And parents are grateful when science gives them the proper means for the development of their tender children into strong men and women.

The same rule holds for their mental development. This also takes place through the use of means. Mental development needs even greater care than physical development. A child can not

learn how to speak without being taught, and still less can it learn to think properly. Knowledge, which is of course necessary, is not accidentally acquired. We fortunately have schools that help the child in the development of its mind, and even somewhat of its character. And though compulsory education seems to justify the supposition that many parents put but little value on knowledge, the majority would not think of neglecting the means that are at hand for thorough mental training.

For a healthy growth of spiritual life, which is the highest, we are also bound to use the proper means. Alas, every one does not seem to realize this. Some people seem to be fatalistic in this respect. There are parents who will neglect their children spiritually, while they exert every effort for their physical and mental development.

There are even some who cover up their carelessness with pious verbiage. They say, the Lord must save our child. We may not take His work out of His hands. It is useless to teach children to pray. That is not real prayer, anyway. Real prayer cannot be learned as some lesson. It must be wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit.

There is indeed in these statements an element of truth that keeps us from pronouncing a harsh

judgment on such parents. They feel deeply dependent on the grace of God, and such humility must be praised, not condemned. Besides, it is true that the Lord, who gives the first germ of life, must also bring it to fruition. Grace is the beginning, grace is the development, grace is also the perfection of spiritual life. And they who make use of the means of grace must not forget the prayer: "Forsake not the works of thine own hands, O Jehovah!" Ps. 138.

But does that mean that we will wait with fatalistic patience to see if it pleases the Lord to give growth, after He has given new life?

Far from it! No one other than the Christ Himself has taught us differently. In and through Him spiritual life has been brought into the kingdom of heaven. It is true that there is such an inward power in this kingdom that He could compare it to leaven that leavens three measures of meal without any outside aid. There is also such vigour in the kingdom of heaven that Jesus could compare it to a mustard seed that grows into a tree in which the birds of the air can make their nests. But Jesus did not expect that the extension of His kingdom would be brought about solely by its inward vigour. Before he left this earth He sent out His apostles to preach the gospel to all the peoples

of the world, teaching them to keep whatsoever He had commanded. The kingdom of heaven would therefore not only grow through its own ethical powers, but also by the use of means given to that end. Not that these means would be sufficient of themselves to attain Christ's purpose. For Jesus has added this promise to his great commission: "And lo, I am with you alway even to the end of the world." The means he gave would be fruitful only because he himself worked in and through them.

This same principle holds for the individual believer.

Every true disciple is a little kingdom of heaven. In all the children of God there lies hidden, potentially, the gestating power of a leaven that leavens all life; the antiseptic power of salt; and the vigour to grow as a mustard tree.

But if this growth and increase is not to be hindered, but rather aided, human means are necessary through which God, who giveth the increase, can work with His grace.

It is therefore true that no one can add a cubit to his spiritual stature, no matter how seriously he may try. But it is just as true what Paul has written to the Philippians: "So then, my beloved, even as ye have always obeyed, not as in my pres-

ence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for His good pleasure."

This text deals chiefly with growth in grace.

The Philippians had become partakers of salvation when the apostle sent them this letter. Paul is not writing to unbelieving heathen or worldlings, but to a church which he himself had founded, and of which Lydia and the jailer had been the first members. The readers of this epistle were therefore believers who had learned to bow before the word of God. But the salvation of which they had just become possessors was to be developed more and more, till it should find its final fruition in the heavenly glory.

This text therefore speaks of growth in spiritual life. Paul does not tell them to quietly wait for whatever the Lord may have ordained for them. In strong and bold language he urges them to work out their salvation, to be active, for he knew that spiritual indolence would result in spiritual poverty.

Work out your own salvation!

They may not be passive. They may not be slothful in the great work of salvation. They themselves must be energetic in working out what God

has in principle wrought in them, if they are to attain their divinely appointed goal.

But is our growth then finally our own imperfect work?

By no means. It is impossible that we through our own labors would be able to add a single grain to the eternal weight of our salvation. That would be a denial of Christ as a perfect Saviour, who has not only completed everything that was necessary FOR us, but Who also finishes His work IN us. Paul does indeed urge us to activity, but he adds a "for," which gives the reason why we can work. "For it is God who worketh in you, both to will and to work, for His good pleasure."

God inspires us to will the good. He also enables us to work. Our own willing and working is but some pliable copper wire. But when God charges it with the electric current of His power, the will and ability to work out our salvation is wrought in us by God.

We must therefore use all the means the Lord gives us for our spiritual growth. The expression, "with fear and trembling," points especially to the abhorrence we must have of all evil that might in any way hinder our spiritual growth. Paul is therefore thinking especially of the things that might hurt our inward life, while he is silent on what

might aid. He admonishes us to be very careful to avoid whatever might endanger our salvation.

That includes all reckless playing with sin, for in the end sin will play with us, and we will drift ever farther away from God.

All worldliness, which still lingers in the hearts of God's children, and makes them doubly guilty, because they are sinning against their God-given light.

All discord and strife that disturbs the innner harmony of our life, and opens doors for our arch-enemy, Satan, the chief sower of all the discord in the world.

All intimate fellowship with those who are known as enemies of Christ, since such fellowship causes our conscience to lose its sensitivity.

In a word, all things that might bring us again under the bondage of sin after we have been delivered from its Pharaonic tyranny.

There is much to be avoided,— that is the negative side of our efforts to grow in grace.

But there is also much to be done. That is the positive side. We must diligently use all the means God has ordained for our spiritual growth.

A Day's Portion Every Day

V

A DAY'S PORTION EVERY DAY

IF there is to be a steady development of our spiritual life we must be active as newborn children of God. That does not mean that this activity is the result of our own impulses and powers. In the holy domain of regeneration we can but work because God has enabled us to do so by His grace. Here also the Lord is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Both the source and the completion, as well as all the development between, are from God. It is God who works in us both to will and to work out our salvation till perfection is achieved.

There is nothing arbitrary in our spiritual activity.

God has given us a number of means by which we can acquire His grace for the growth of our spiritual life. And we must make diligent use of these means, if our inner life is not to languish.

In the first place we mention the prayerful meditation of the Word of God. The Word of God is the manna-field where we must gather the necessary food for our soul, if we are to have an ever

vigorous Christian life. In its journey through the wilderness the people of Israel were kept alive with manna. Christ applies this to Himself. He is the true bread that came down from heaven and gives life to the world.

This Christ comes to us in the Word of God. He is as it were incorporated in it. Therefore the study of the Bible is a first requisite for a flourishing soul life.

The Word of God is the spiritual food that is fit for the soul. We read that one of the prophets was commanded by God to eat as food the roll on which the word of God was written. Paul urges the ministers of the Gospel to rightly divide the Word as bread. It is also compared to honey and the honeycomb with which the weary pilgrim is refreshed so that his lack-luster eyes brighten again.

But the finest figure for our purpose is the one we find in the first epistle of Peter. In the first chapter of his epistle he calls the living and abiding Word of God an incorruptible seed, from which our spiritual life shoots forth after it has been taken up in the field of our hearts.

With these words he pictures the beginning of our spiritual life. Then, in the second chapter of the same epistle, he calls the Word of God MILK with which our spiritual life is nourished and sus-

tained. "As newborn babes," he writes, "long for the spiritual milk which is without guile, that ye may grow thereby unto salvation; if ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious."

This is a figure from daily life.

For a newborn child is indeed very hungry for its mother's milk. It needs no intsruction to reach its mother's breast. Following an innate instinct it satisfies its hunger and thirst. No substitute, no matter how carefully prepared, can take the place of a mother's breast for feeding an infant. In this respect also God's creative work cannot be imitated, let alone improved.

In the same manner the milk of the Word is the ordained means to sustain and strengthen our spiritual life. As the infant yearns for its mother's breast, so also every one who is regenerated will yearn for the Word of God. He simply can not live without it. He feels that the Word fits him as he fits the Word. They both seek each other through an inward impulse. We therefore have a proof of new life in our hearts when we find that we love that Word with our whole heart, and will let nothing take it away from us.

In certain circles there are men and women who readily speak of the marks of grace. Quite often

they are sought in certain emotional experiences. But all can not enjoy such experiences.

According to many a hallelujah-mood is the mark of grace. Then a converted sinner should always be jubilant, and no more be plagued with sighing and heaviness of heart, even though saints as David and Paul certainly had days in which they felt oppressed.

Others find proof of grace in the very opposite frame of mind. They doubt your salvation unless you have personally experienced the horrors of Gethsemane, forgetting that Christ has experienced them for the church He has bought with a price. Such people would have you continually taste the fears of hell. Then, if some small gleam of light shines in that darkness, you may consider yourself saved.

No doubt all these things are said with the best of intentions. But is it not far more simple to ask yourself whether you yearn for the milk of God's Word? And find a proof of grace in that fact?

Then you stay on the firm basis of God's revelation. A Mary sat quietly at the feet of Jesus to listen to His words. And when, at the departure of the Galilean multitude, Jesus asked his disciples whether they did not want to go away also, Peter

replied: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life!"

In the text we have quoted from Peter's epistle we read of spiritual milk.*

The Word of God brings reasonable thoughts or truths into our minds. These truths fill our consciousness. For we are reasonable creatures. That is why our spiritual birth is from this reasonable Word. And the only way we can grow is through the use of this reasonable food.

The milk must also be without guile, UNADULTERATED.

If it is mixed with errors and lies, or with human conclusions, it loses its strengthening power. We must take that milk the way the Lord has given it, and absorb it in its unmixed purity. Then only will it enrich the world of our thoughts, purify our hearts day by day, and strengthen our wills to noble purpose.

If we are to be built up inwardly we must, of course, make *daily* use of God's Word. An infant is not only now and then, but daily desirous, very desirous, for its mother's milk. Its daily use brings body-building power to the child. And we adults

*We might also read "reasonable" milk. We find the same word in Romans 12:1, where we read of reasonable service. (A. V.) An exact rendering of the word would be: logical. "Logical milk." Translator.

not only eat once, but several times a day, for the sustenance of our bodies. So also for a healthy growth of our spiritual life it is necessary that the Bible be opened daily, to be read in the circle of our families.

In this respect no other book can take or should take the place of the Bible. The finest books of Godfearing men and women are but little brooks from this Book of books, which is, and ever remains the Fountain of living waters. Writers can but explain, describe, and apply what is revealed by the Scriptures as truth. Therefore they can but give aid in the study of the Bible. Whatever is found in their books that feeds the soul, strengthens faith, and comforts the heart, is derived from the Bible itself.

We also wish to condemn the delusion that is found in some circles that it is possible to outgrow the Word of God, and therefore no longer have need of it. Some hyper-spiritual people think that the Bible is useful for beginners, or to call a sinner to halt on his sinful way. But when he is once saved, they think that with the gift of the Holy Spirit he has received enough light, light that is placed above the Bible. According to them we are immediately led and taught by the Spirit of the Lord after our conversion. The testimony of the

Spirit in their hearts is of more value to them than the testimony of the Spirit in the Word. Of course, the danger is ever present, that they take the ideas of their own spirit for those of the Holy Spirit. History has passed its judgment on such spiritual enthusiasts however, when they became guilty of all manner of excesses under the pretense that they were inspired by the Holy Ghost. Those errorists began with the spirit, but ended with the flesh.

Let no one be decoyed on such sinful paths.

It is far better to follow the example of Israel when it journeyed through the wilderness. As the father of the family went out every morning at early dawn, before the sun had gained strength, to gather manna for his family, "a day's portion every day," so it is still the duty of the father as head of the family to go out into the manna-field of God's Word, to open the Bible, read a chapter, and in that way give food for the soul to large and small, to adult and child.

The most opportune time is the morning hour.

Our minds are then yet fresh. Our hearts are not yet full of the cares of the day. The attention is at its best, and this last is so very necessary if we are to receive an edifying blessing through the reading of the Word of God.

If the Word of God is manna, or "reasonable" milk, it must not only be brought TO us, but must also be absorbed BY us. Who can appropriate the rich and manifold thoughts of God in his little mind unless he reads or listens with undivided attention?

But if we hungrily eat and drink the thoughts of God, thoughts of peace and reconciliation, thoughts of instruction and comfort, thoughts of salvation and glory, we will absorb POWER that strengthens us in a marvellous way, just as an infant absorbs its mother's milk, and transforms it into body-building power.

Naturally we do not remember throughout the day all that we have read in the morning. Nor is such necessary. We often forget what we have eaten, yet we are strengthened just the same. Read and listen attentively. Assimilate what is read with mind and heart, so that it becomes part of yourself. And the result will be a bold, and fresh, and vigorously healthy spiritual life . . . . The power of the Word of God is immeasurable.

How Lovely Are Thy Tabernacles!

VI

HOW LOVELY ARE THY TABERNACLES!

THE Words we have written above this chapter refer to the house of God. They at once suggest that the meditative study of God's Word is not the only means of grace which God has given for the development of our spiritual life.

One of the Psalms speaks of the blessedness of the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scoffers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on it day and night.

In the Psalm from which the topic of this chapter has been chosen, we are shown the way in which we can grow in such grace. The Psalmist is the spokesman of all those who are not satisfied with the first principles of spiritual life, but desire perfection, when he says: "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Jehovah of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of Jehovah; my heart and my flesh cry out unto the living God."

The administration of the Word of God on the Lord's Day is, indeed, next to the quiet, meditative

study of its pages, the one means of grace which is best adapted for our growth in perfection. For it is neither through some blind fate, nor the result of some arbitrary, human decision, that the churches are in a spiritual sense the centers of every city and hamlet in Christendom. The times have changed, religiously. You can no longer see from the arrangement of the cities that the church is, figuratively, their center. But in former days the churches were the centers round about which the homes of the citizenry were clustered. It seemed to symbolize that in the church men would find the fountain that laved the thirst of their souls. And this acknowledgment of the prime importance of the ministry of the Word is something for which we should be grateful to our God.

Before the establishment of the instituted church Christ had prophesied that wherever the gospel would be preached men would remember the anointing of a Mary of Bethany. Just before His ascension into heaven Christ had promised His disciples that they would be endowed with the Holy Spirit to be WITNESSES for him to the ends of the earth. And what we call the offices of the church is also based on the institution of Christ. For Paul says that Christ has given some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and

some PASTORS AND TEACHERS. And then he adds that this was done for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for the edification of the body of Christ.

Edification, perfection, in a word, spiritual growth, is only possible if we keep the ministry of the Word, through its preaching, in high honor, and diligently attend its service. The loveliness of the tabernacles of the Lord is not seen by us in the beauty of majestic architecture of cathedrals, nor in the clouds of incense that fill the Roman Catholic houses of prayer. Nor do we find it in any other external ceremony that appeals much more to our emotions than to our hearts. We find it in the preaching of the Word. It humbles us, comforts us, strengthens and encourages us. We feel more at home in a humble chapel without any pomp or splendor, where the message of grace is brought in its purity, than in any monumental building where the message of reconciliation is not heard. Grace is more than beauty. Beauty appeals to the eye, but grace appeals to the heart that yearns for justification and peace with God.

In his epistle to the Ephesians Paul speaks of the building up of the body of Christ. In our daily conversation about spiritual life we often use the word "edify." Both words bring the same idea.

Then our spiritual life has been strengthened, and our spiritual stature has been enlarged.

But we are not necessarily edified when our emotions have been touched, as some seem to think. When some preacher has moved his audience to tears, people speak of being "edified." Of course, we will not condemn that fact that our eyes become moist under the preaching of the Word. To be absolutely unmoved under the preaching of the boundless mercy of God, is surely not a sign of grace. Christ Himself has been deeply moved on more than one occasion. But if such emotions only occur at the dramatic mention of death and the grave, they are often nothing but some nervous agitation that does not change a man; while true contrition comes from the Spirit's touch upon the harp-strings of the heart.

False "edification" is a passing mood.

True edification has lasting results.

Take the mason on the scaffold.

He adds stone to stone, row upon row, tier upon tier. The walls gradually rise as if they were growing. You notice the steady advance. It takes some time before the building is finished. Much care is also necessary in fitting together the building materials. But after a period of days, weeks, and months, all can see an edifice where once was noth-

ing but empty land. It is a building that LASTS, one that is not swept away by every wind that blows.

That is the imagery of the edification of the church.

And also of the development of spiritual life.

According to the command of the Lord this work has been given to the preachers and pastors, who have been lawfully ordained to the ministry of the Word for the purpose of edifying the church as a whole, as well as the spiritual life of the individual members.

The ministry is therefore an excellent office of great responsibility. For though it is true that Christ has promised to build His church on the confession of Peter, He yet does such through the ministry of the Word that is entrusted to pastors and preachers.

How comprehensive is not the scope of the work of the ministry!

Whoever has been called to that office must take diligent care not to preach anything but the Word of God, of which the crucified and glorified Christ is the center. He may never forget that the growth of the church, and of the individual members, is not brought about through his eloquence, pulpit oratory, talents, knowledge or wisdom, but only

through the preaching of the manifold Word of God.

A scientific essay, even though it be one on theological problems, is out of place on the pulpit. Such may satisfy the thinking mind, but does not satisfy the heart that is yearning for salvation. A splendid discourse on some religious theme derived from some text in the Bible is equally out of place on the pulpit, though it may be edifying in a meeting other than the church services. And whoever parades his erudition, or advocates his private views, gives stones instead of bread. They may be precious stones, glittering diamonds, but a finely attuned soul spurns all that glory and glitter for a single morsel of the bread of life.

Do not reply that if the Word of God is the only requisite for our spiritual growth, we may just as well remain at home, and meditate on it in quiet, as to attend the house of the Lord. From the pulpit you receive a faithful exposition of the Word of God. Its meaning is explained, so that you understand it better. The meaning of a given portion of Scripture is set forth in such a way that you realize that it has direct bearing on your own life. It is applied to the various needs of the worshippers. You learn how inexhaustably rich the Bible is. And you can comprehend how your pastor can feed the

whole flock with but a verse or two, just as Christ during His earthly ministry fed five thousand with a few loaves and fishes.

But then it is necessary that the preacher use fine discrimination.

Beneath the pulpit there are men and fathers, but also babes in Christ. Who has a message fitted only for mature minds in spiritual matters, and has no word for the beginners on the way of life, is an incapable minister of Him who put the wise of Israel to shame, but laid His hands in blessing on infant babes.

The church is a motley multitude.

There are seeking souls and steadfast believers. Timid Nicodemuses and bold Simons. Meditative Nathanaels and rich young rulers. The broken hearted and the contrite in spirit. Fallen and degraded. Lukewarm Laodiceans and sons of thunder. Intellectual men and tender women. And young men of will power who want a conquering Christianity.

So we might go on. But enough has been said to show what heavy demands are made on the preachers of the gospel, weak and sinful men as they are, when they must administer the Word of God.

How is it possible to meet such diverse needs?

That is indeed the miracle! But you can see it take place. If the Word of grace is simply preached, each of the many worshippers receives SOMETHING for his soul. His spiritual life is strengthened. The various parts of the Christian's armor fit better. All have heard God's voice speaking to them from His Word. And this speaking of God is a creative speaking, even as in the beginning. New strength, new faith, new peace, new joy, and a new hope has been wrought in their hearts. There is inward growth. But such is the result only when they have entered the house of prayer with the words of the psalmist on their lips: "My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of Jehovah; my heart and my flesh cry out unto the living God!"

Self-Examination

VII

SELF-EXAMINATION

AMONG the means of grace the diligent attendance of the services in the courts of the Lord takes first place. There we are edified with the preaching of the Word.

Our hearts may not always be yearning to tread the courts of the Lord; our church attendance may be the result of commonplace habit rather than deep-felt desire. This does not take away the fact that even then a purifying and edifying energy proceeds from faithful attendance of the house of prayer.

The man who attends the preaching of the Word only when his heart pants for the waterbrooks, is playing the fool. Custom has a tremendous influence in the life of the soul. We read even of the Christ Himself that He worshipped in the synagog "as was His custom." Such fixed habits, which recur week after week, determine the trend of our inner life. The character of human beings is generally the result of their habits. Whoever is seriously determined to develop himself will never speak slightingly of good habits. He will hold them

in honor, and will gradually experience that the habits he has consistently maintained, become a necessary part of his life.

Next to the Word comes the Sacrament.

Especially the use of the Lord's Supper.

Between these two means of grace we would place selfexamination.

That does not mean that such selfexamination would be limited to the so-called week of preparation that precedes Holy Communion. On the contrary, we cannot live a single day without serious criticism of ourselves. But we are willing to admit that this earnest investigation of ourselves should be more thorough before we attend the Lord's Supper.

This selfexamination is by no means easy.

It is already a difficult task for the surgeons to trace an aberration in our physical life. A careful examination is given. A microscopic analysis is taken of sputum and blood. All kinds of possible symptoms are carefully considered. We have all seen our physicians busy with such minute tasks.

The psychiatrists have still harder work, since the invisible soul is the object of their study. Boundless patience, combined with keen powers of observation, are necessary to determine the

nature of the mental aberrations, and point the way in which normal health can be attained.

Naturally all investigation becomes more difficult when we are not examined by some one else, but must examine our own soul life to know what is wrong, to find out from what evil we suffer, and what sinful tendencies run counter to our spiritual life.

Selfexamination, which involves self-criticism, and usually leads to self-condemnation, is so extremely difficult because self-deception is so easily possible. Who can trust his own heart, his heart so full of guile? The Psalmist raised this question in the past. And he answers it by saying: "O Jehovah, Thou hast searched me." Indeed, the Lord alone searches us thoroughly to the depths of our being. The necessary conclusion is, therefore, that we can only examine ourselves fruitfully if we are enlightened by the Spirit of God. When this Divine light shines upon us we will arrive to at least a partial knowledge of the condition of our own soul. Wherever this Divine light is lacking all selfexamination is too flighty, and does not enter into the hidden recesses of the heart. Then men stop halfway, instead of piercing their sinful ulcers to the core.

Real selfexamination means that we descend into

the depths of our hearts to throw a searchlight, as it were, into the darkest corners. And the result is always disappointing to our pride. What we see in those hidden depths will often cause us to shudder. There we find carnal thoughts, passions but hardly checked, impure lusts, and unholy desires. O, indeed, in the case of true believers, we also find here and there the gold of grace. We find the desire to pray, and hunger after the God of salvation. There is an urgent yearning for secret fellowship with Christ, and a desire to live nearer to God.

But even these holy impulses are polluted with sin and all kinds of selfish by-ends. In a word, we are bitterly disappointed with ourselves. Where would we flee, if there were no Christ with whom we can find reconciliation, covering, for all our iniquities?

Selfexamination may not, however, degenerate in a too minute self-dissection. We can dissect a corpse. But dissection would kill a living person. In former ages men would keep a diary of their spiritual reactions. They would literally examine themselves at every point of God's holy law, and would unravel their soul life to its finest threads. Their selfexamination was more minute than the questioning in any confessional. One by one the

sins and shortcomings, the trials and temptations, the transgressions in deeds, words and thoughts, were counted and weighed. They were continually gnawing at their own vitals. Indeed, with a certain selfsatisfaction men spoke and wrote of the profound knowledge that they had acquired of their own misery. But how would such exposure of each leprous spot take the place of the shame and sorrow of a David, who did indeed call his sin bloodguiltiness, but who, because of his conviction of sin, came with this touching confession to his God: "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done that which is evil in Thy sight; that Thou mayest be justified when Thou speakest, and be clear when Thou judgest!'

Selfexamination must not only lead to the knowledge of our shortcomings and transgressions. This is only one of the stations on the way. We must advance, and know ourselves as guilty sinners before a holy God. We must know OURSELVES in the awful corruption of our hearts, from which all our sinful deeds bubble forth as waters from a poisonous fountain. Know ourselves as lost, prodigal sons and daughters, who are unworthy of even a place as an hireling. Know ourselves in our spiritual impotence and unworthiness, and in the waywardness of our hearts. For the number of our

transgressions does not come into judgment apart from our own persons. We ourselves must appear before the Judgment seat to receive a reward according to our deeds, whether they be good or bad.

Only when our selfexamination is so thorough that it exposes the forlorn condition of our very person will it lead to selfpurification, and as a result, to the growth of our spiritual life.

Of course we will wage constant warfare against the sins that we discover in us by the light of the Spirit. And in the consciousness of our own helplessness we will wage that battle on our knees, knowing that the omnipotent grace of God, and that grace only, is stronger than the sin that holds us captive.

Above all, however, will we wage this battle against our own selves, in order that everything of the old sinful nature that still works in us may be crucified in the fellowship of Christ; and that we, in fellowship with the now glorified Christ, may walk in newness of life.

Selfknowledge can lead to despair, as we can see in the cases of Cain and Judas, who both made confession of sin without receiving peace. But selfknowledge can also lead to the spiritual growth of our inner life. Then the descent into the depths of our hearts will be followed by the ascent of our

spiritual life. It will lead to the strengthening of our faith, to a greater dependence of God's preserving grace, to a more earnest hope on His faithfulness, and a more humble walk before His face.

That is the final purpose of all selfexamination. Who knows himself, knows his enemy.

And who knows his enemy will flee in the name of Jesus Christ to God, in order that His grace may strengthen him in the good fight of faith. In the depths of our selfknowledge the desire is born for increasing holiness. The penitential psalm of David is an example. Hear him begin with this plaint: "For I know my transgression and my sin is ever before me." But the words become more tremulous when he looks from his sins to himself: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me!"

Yet that is after all only the beginning of the psalm. From these abysmal depths the prayer soon arises: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation; and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then will I teach transgressors Thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto Thee."

Here we plainly see that true selfexamination

leads to spiritual convalescense, even to spiritual health and prosperity, and to growth in grace. But then we must not examine ourselves only at some irregular moments. After we have stumbled or fallen into some sin we will indeed feel the need of selfexamination more keenly. But whoever neglects it for but a single day becomes a stranger to his own heart, and will later have to bear the painful results of negligence.

Every evening therefore when we bend our knees before God we should have an hour of self-examination. With all that you place before God concerning your dear ones and your needs, do not forget yourself. Push aside every veil between you and your God. Exercise an honest, sharp criticism on yourself. Show yourself as you are: a wretched sinner, but one who cannot let the Christ go. And you will receive the blessing of a richer personality through the energy of forgiving grace.

And when the day for Holy Communion approaches let your selfexamination be keener than ever. And if you then, with all the unholiness that still cleaves to you, also notice the beginnings of faith in the Christ who was broken on the cross for you; if you must confess that there is yet much sin in your heart, but may also testify to the work of grace, then you may come boldly, and you will be marvellously strengthened with bread and cup.

Bread and Cup

VIII

BREAD AND CUP

WE have now come to a discussion of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Next to the administration of the Word it is the richest means of grace for the strengthening of the spiritual life of faith, of which the first beginnings must at least be present, if we are to be worthy of a place at the Holy Table.

We may therefore partake of this sacrament only if we have made confession of our faith. Christ has instituted it only for those who have found peace for their souls in His reconciling suffering and death, and now feel compelled to unite themselves with all who proclaim the death of the Lord till he comes.

The preaching of the Word comes to all.

The administration of the Lord's Supper is only for believers.

We must not take this distinction to mean that bread and cup give us a knowledge of, and an enjoyment in, new blessings of salvation, in addition to what is preached to us in the administration of the Word. In a number of heathen religions we

find the so-called mysteries, the knowledge of which is limited to the initiated, because the novices are not able to grasp these hidden truths. The sacraments are indeed called mysteries in the Bible. The pastors and preachers are called stewards, or dispensers, of the mysteries of God. (I Cor. 4:1, 2) But that does not mean that the Lord's Supper adds some new element to the truth of the gospel, by which the spiritual possessions of the believers are increased.

On the contrary, in the administration of the Word a FULL salvation is preached. Nothing is kept back for the more mature minds. The complete gospel of salvation concentrates in Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The forgiveness of sins in His blood is in the center of all Divine revelation. During the old dispensation everything pointed to the cross. In the new dispensation everything leads out from it. That is why Paul could say that he did not want to bring anything but that message only.

The only difference between preaching and sacrament lies in the way in which one and the same truth is presented. In the preaching through the **spoken** word. In the sacrament through a **pictured** word. For that reason the sacrament is called a sign. We are not hearing with our ears, but are

seeing with our eyes, that the bread is broken and the wine is poured forth. The sacrament is as it were a "visible word." In a picturesque way it shows us how Christ's body was broken, and His blood shed, for the remission of our sins.

But that does not yet explain how it can strengthen our spiritual life in a special way. This result of the Lord's Supper first becomes plain when we remember that it is not only a sign, but also a SEAL, as the sacraments are in very truth. We have but to bear in mind what we read in the epistle to the Romans: "And he received the SIGN of circumcision, a SEAL of the righteousness of faith."

The Lord's Supper is a seal in a twofold sense.

First of all the covenant of grace is sealed and affirmed to us by God through the administration of the Lord's Supper. We might say that this puts the covenant under a Divine seal objectively.

Even in ancient times a seal gave greater assurance to a promised word. The impress of a seal would then usually be made in sealing wax. Such a seal would be attached with a cord of silk to the document in which the pledged word was written. In our day the seals are usually printed on the documents. All of us have on occasion met with

such documents. Only on very solemn occasions is a seal still loosely attached to the parchment.

What document can have greater value than the Testament or Covenant of grace, in which the Lord promises to graciously forgive us all our sins because of the satisfaction of Christ? In which he promises us eternal life in the way of faith, and opens up the bright prospect of the glory of heaven, even of a new heaven and a new earth?

It is really too much for an unworthy sinner to appropriate such a rich promise. Has he not made himself unworthy of all these blessings through his transgressions? There is a voice within that tells him not to be too bold. It causes many to remain away. Then a believer dare not lay his hands on the promises of the Lord in faith. He thinks that they are probably meant for others. He would gladly make them his spiritual possession, but a holy timidity holds him back.

The Lord knows these fluctuations of faith.

Naturally God would have a perfect right to censure such hesitating men and women. Is He not faithful? Everything that He declares in His Word is true. He is not man that He should lie, nor a son of man that He should change his mind about that which He once has spoken. Men ought to take Him solely on His Word!

Yet He meets our doubts and infirmities. To His word of promise He adds the seal of the sacrament. That seal guarantees the truth of His promises, which are yea and amen in Jesus Christ. At the Communion table He as it were puts the seal into our hands that we may see and handle it.

And when we receive this seal of the covenant we feel instinctively, do we not, that we may no longer doubt? We may no longer harbor a feeling of distrust in regard to the grace of God, as if we had no share in it. And that already brings more firmness to our faith, and causes us to grow in grace.

But this is not all.

In addition to the objective sealing of the promise of the covenant, there is also a subjective sealing of the believer himself at the communion service. According to the words we have just quoted from Paul's epistle to the Romans, the sacrament was a seal of the righteousness of faith for Abraham. This sealing takes place therefore in the inner life of our soul. It is directly connected with the objective sealing. In a certain sense the subjective sealing results from it. But it has its own characteristics however. The sealing of the covenant through the sacrament makes the foundation of our faith more firm, while the sealing of the

righteousness of faith takes place within us, and therefore directly strengthens our spiritual life.

How must we explain this inward strengthening?

It goes without saying that material elements, as a bit of bread, and a sip of wine, may build up the body, but do not build up the soul, which is spiritual, and can therefore be strengthened by spiritual means only.

Spiritual factors must therefore be present at the Lord's Supper. And then they must be such factors as come from Christ Himself, since the bread and the wine are signs representing Him.

In the course of the ages there has never been any doubt as to the FACT that Christ is present in some form or other at the communion service. But there has been a bitter, and in many ways an unholy, battle over the question HOW Christ was present.

Rome teaches that through their consecration the bread and the wine are actually changed into the body and blood of Christ. Luther thought that bread and wine remained unchanged, but that Christ was also present bodily in, with, and among, the signs. The Reformed view is that Jesus Christ is bodily in heaven, also when we celebrate His Supper, but that He communicates Himself,

in a mystical way, through grace, to the participants of the sacrament, who lift up their hearts to Him.

No matter how different these views may be, however, all three maintain this truth, that the Lord's Supper involves communion with Christ Himself, and that the strengthening of our spiritual life is not dependent on the signs, but on the Christ Himself.

The experience of the communicants confirms the truth that a believing participation of the Lord's Supper strengthens spiritual life. The blessed results that come from the refreshing communion with Christ are not always the same for our consciousness. Many a believer goes to the communion table with a feeling of spiritual lassitude. Yet he will feel the comforting presence of the Lord in such a manifest way that his heart sings: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters; He restoreth my soul!"

Refreshed, encouraged, and bold in spirit, he arises from the communion service to walk on the paths of righteousness, and serve and praise his God. With a firm hand he takes upon his shoulders the yoke of Christ.

The bond of fellowship with the believing brotherhood is also greatly strengthened. We are conscious that we are one with all who confess the same faith, and share in the same redemption from sin. This renewed affection benefits our neighbor. If the mind of Christ, who dwells in us, has been invigorated with the holy bread and wine, the result must be that we are ready to serve our brethren in our small way, as Christ has served us beyond all human measure. The communion with Christ, who has given His life as a sacrifice for us, enables us to bring sacrifices of love and thanksgiving. We realize, at least to some extent, that our bodies must also be broken, and be sacrificed for others, though in an altogether different sense than with Christ.

Such are some of the results that come from the edifying power of the Lord's Supper. We come to greater spiritual growth. What is weak is made strong. Fluctuating faith becomes firm faith. We are assured that nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ. And we sing:

Ye sin-sick souls draw near,
    And banquet with your King,
His royal bounty share,

And loud hosannas sing:
Here mercy reigns, here peace abounds,
Here's blood to heal your dreadful wounds.

On earth I'll sing His love,
In heaven I too shall join
The ransomed of the Lord,
In accents all divine;
And see my Saviour face to face,
And ever dwell in his embrace.

The Necessity of Prayer

IX

THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER

PRAYER is one of those tender things that are hurt when touched by coarse fingers.

Though it be therefore with diffidence, we must also mention the blessing that comes from prayer for the development of our spiritual life. It is numbered among the means of grace, and is one that was used by the disciples of our Lord. They prayed him reverently: "Lord, increase our faith."

And it is not without significance that we read of Paul, after his conversion on the way to Damascus, that Jesus says of him to the hesitating Ananias: "Behold, he prayeth!"

Prayer is necessary for spiritual growth.

What is more, it is a necessity, an impulse of the new life that has been wrought in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. For that reason it has often been called the breath of the soul. As soon as spiritual life is present, no matter how weak, it manifests itself in the breathing of prayer.

That does not mean that it is sufficient to seek the face of God in prayer whenever we feel impelled to do so. Such a pressing sense of need is a

quite rare occurrence. Our busy life with its many cares, its anxieties and needs, lays such a heavy hand on us, that the impulse to pray is often smothered instead of fostered.

On this holy domain the parable of the seed among the thorns is illustrative. We are exposed to all manner of stifling forces. We should therefore not neglect stated times of prayer, but follow a definite line of conduct, just as the Lord has ordained for the ministry of the Word.

The danger of routine naturally lies at the door.

When our prayers become externalized they do not bring a blessing. They rather foster a deadening formalism. For that very reason the Roman custom of continually repeating the same prayer with a monotonous counting of beads is not to be commended. Such exercises simply weary the mind. They bring about spiritual lassitude, while prayer actually demands the highest kind of spiritual energy, as an arrow speeds to its mark only when the bowstrings are taut.

We must therefore be on our guard against moribund forms.

But forms need not always be dead. They must be vitalized with spiritual content, and they are very valuable as aids. Of an earnest worshipper as Daniel we read that he thrice daily bent his

knees, and prayed to his God, before a window that faced towards Jerusalem. And he needed such regular order in his life far less than we do. We do not come to his loins in our spiritual stature. And if the gravest threats could not keep that man of God from following his daily prayer habits, how much the more are we not duty bound to keep them.

On the other hand we cannot do away with spontaneous prayer in such moments when our heart is impelled to seek the Fountain of our lives. Morning, midday, and evening prayers cover our daily needs, which are generally the same. But sometimes hours of grievous temptation come. Sometimes a cup of sorrow is placed in our hands, from which we shudder. We then learn something at least of Gethsemane's anguish. Then a living disciple must bend his knees without being confined to set hours of prayer.

Regular prayers and spontaneous prayers complement each other.

And then a sanctifying power, that simply cannot be overestimated in its value for the development of our spiritual life, comes from prayer. We find numerous examples of this in sacred history. David strengthened himself in the Lord his God. Prayer became a fountain source of new

energy for him. Moses returned from the mountain with his face aglow from having been in the presence of God. When we stand in the presence of God a sheen of grace and glory overspreads our lives. We then have the recognized traits of God's saints. Nehemiah breathed a hurried prayer to God when he stood beside the king as his cupbearer, and was asked why his countenance was sad. That brief, unuttered prayer became the source of wisdom. God gave him the correct words to use in his plea to the Persian tyrant for the rebuilding of the temple.

And how often has Christ not urged His disciples to watch and pray that they might not fall into temptation. And since our earthly life is a struggle in which we are attacked by adverse circumstances and evil forces, Paul urges us to make use of prayer as one of the parts of the panoply of God, in order that we may stand in the evil day.

Our daily experience proves the truth of this teaching of Scripture.

Our spiritual life is literally broadened and deepened through prayer. When we bend our knees in prayer we learn to be of one mind with the Lord our God in our greatest need, and in our most poignant sorrows. Through prayer we are enabled to bear the cross courageously. When we under-

stand that the thorn in our flesh will not be withdrawn, we also know that the strength of the Lord is fulfilled in our weakness, and that His grace is sufficient for us.

Prayer comforts us in the greatest sorrow. It is a staff upon which we can lean when forsaken by all. It makes us patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and gives us faith for the future. It makes us masters of our passions, and gives us endurance amid shame and scorn. It even creates love in our hearts for our enemies, and causes us to bless them that curse us.

What a sanctifying power is the power of prayer!

Nothing can be compared to it.

We seem to be ever so helpless when we stand before the Lord in an attitude of prayer. Our hands are idle. But it is in those very hours of complete dependence, in which even the attitude of our bodies shows that we can do nothing of ourselves, that we are performing the finest labor for the development of our spiritual life. Rather, the Spirit of God works in us both to will and to perfect the work of our salvation.

Our inner life is therefore ripened through prayer.

This is most evident when our prayers become

intercessory prayers. Our spiritual life not only grows when we place ourselves and our personal needs before the face of God. There is still greater power in prayer when we place ourselves in the background, and remember others in our petitions. Selfishness can also enter into our prayers, and desecrate them. Then we stand before the face of God as if we were the only persons on earth, and we alone needed grace and help.

But if we place the needs of our home, with all its members, great and small, before the Lord in prayer, our heart is enlarged. This becomes the more true when we include in our petitions the needs of church and nation, of city and community, of president and governor, and of the many sinners we know, who are erring from the path of life and are wandering on the bypaths of sin. And if we then add the needs of the kingdom of God in its broad sense, the kingdom that shall one day envelop all the earth; if we remember the missions among the heathen, and everything else that involves the glory of God's holy name, we must from very necessity find our souls enriched. Our spiritual capacities then become greater. We grow inwardly as we thus forget ourselves in the manifold needs of others.

We cannot, of course, expect such intercession,

at least not in such an inclusive way, from our children. There is also a gradual development in the practice of prayer. For we also pray with our mind, even though prayer, real prayer, comes from the heart; and our mind develops with the years.

The time must come for all believers, however, when they arise above the confines of their own needs. Something of the spirit of an Abraham should be found in them also. Abraham pleaded so earnestly for the accursed cities of the valley of Siddim where his nephew Lot then dwelt. And it is humiliating for us to behold him wrestling with his God for the deliverance of those cities. He diligently sought out one conclusive argument to move the heart of the Lord. It was this: "God is just. How can He then destroy the righteous with the wicked? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

O, that we might so plead!

And then experience in our own soul life its enriching blessing!

Such pleading, and such intercessory prayer of godly men is not an innate quality. Grace alone enables us so to pray. External pressure does not avail here, and is even harmful. Even a friendly admonition, no matter how necessary, does not

teach us to bow our knees in sincerity before our God. We will only learn this lesson when the Spirit of Christ works in us. In His highpriestly prayer Christ knew how to plead touchingly for His own. He is now in heaven, ever to pray for us. In him we have a never silent Intercessor with the Father.

Through His Spirit we learn how to pray, and how to intercede in His Name. We also learn at least something of the apostolic admonition: "Pray without ceasing!" That means much more than that we should bring all the needs of our lives before the throne of grace. It means that our prayers should not only be the pleas that we on every occasion send up to God, but that prayer should be the prevailing mood of our hearts. We are always to be breathing in the holy atmosphere of the Most High.

Practising the Presence of God

X

PRACTISING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

PRAY without ceasing,— this apostolic admonition pointed us to the sphere in which our spiritual life can come to its full bloom.

The well known writer, Drummond, in his book: *Natural law in the Spiritual World,* has drawn a parallel between the living conditions of plants on the one hand, and those of the born again man on the other. He gives his views in connection with the words of Jesus: "Consider the lillies of the field, HOW THEY GROW; they toil not, neither do they spin: yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

The lilies do indeed stand in the fields revealing a marvelous and tender beauty. They have not received their glorious colors through the busy work of spinning hands. They have simply absorbed their nourishment from the earth. They have daily breathed a healthy atmosphere. They have been drenched with the pure dews of heaven.

Food and atmosphere,— these two cause their growth.

In like manner the soul of the man in whom the new life of the Spirit lies hidden, is first of all strengthened by the Word of God, by the sacraments, and by prayer. But in addition it needs the pure atmosphere of the unbroken presence of God, if it is to attain to the glory of the lilies of the field.

This fellowship with God is the pure air which the regenerated soul must breathe, if it is ever to reach that degree of perfection that God has ordained for us on this side of the grave. It consists of intimate, spiritual communion with the God of our life, of which the psalmist testifies: "The friendship (or secret) of Jehovah is with them that fear Him, and He will show them His covenant."

We at once realize that this describes something else than the omnipresence of God. Elsewhere that is described as besetting us behind and before. We can never flee from God, though we took the wings of the morning, and made our bed in Sheol.

The omnipresence of God is without doubt an awful fact. In Him we live, and move, and have our being. We may indeed forget Him, and act as if He did not exist. But in the midst of all our wayward wanderings he makes his presence known in the hot flashes that go through our conscience. He

knows our downsitting and our uprising, and the words of David find an echo in our hearts, when he asks: "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

Faith in SUCH a presence of God is something quite different however from the secret fellowship of God. Many believers must complain that they pass through periods in which they confess with sorrow that the Lord is afar off. They do not feel His immediate presence, but seem to be distant from their Lord. And though they confess that they truly believe in God's omnipresence, and that He therefore must also be near them, they lack at such times the comforting light of His face, and His cherishing love.

As far as conscious fellowship is concerned, God has withdrawn himself from them. And they are yearning for a revival of their spiritual life, so that they can rejoice with an Asaph and say: "It is good for me to draw NEAR unto God: I have made the Lord Jehovah my refuge, that I may tell of all thy works!"

Our soul and our God,— intimately together.

That is the way that leads to secret communion.

The original word in the psalm really means that there are two parties, who draw closely to each other, for the purpose of whispering their

secrets to one another in quiet, confiding conversation. These secrets are not meant for others, but are such as can only be confided to an understanding, receptive, and sympathetic heart.

It is a word of great intimacy.

Among human beings, at least among persons of more profound character, we find something similar. If we may so say, they all have an outward and an inward side to their natures. Their exterior is for the world at large. People think they know such men because they can tell the name, position, work, fortune, home life, and many other matters to all who will listen. Yet they are total strangers to the man's inner life, and to whatever lives and moves there in love and faithfulness, in dreams and ideals.

What is known is but the appearance. Reality remains hidden. As soon as such superficial observers try to peer within the door of the man's soul it instantly shuts . . . . They are not worthy of his confidence. The heart opens only for kindred minds. The holy of holies of the soul is revealed to those only who enter with unshod feet.

In this respect also we are made after the image and likeness of God. Every person, who believes in the existence and omipresence of God, is not yet welcomed to sacred intimacy with Him. Secret

fellowship with God, through which He grants us a glance into the riches of His favor and the comfort of His love, is vouchsafed only to them that fear Him. They understand something of that quiet piety, which makes them take all the experiences of their heart and life to the Lord in prayer.

This secret fellowship with God becomes the more intimate as our piety becomes both more tender and firm. The one will live closer to God than the other. Everything depends on the receptivity of the soul, which gives us more or less capacity for sharing the friendship of God.

One of the most striking examples in the Bible is Enoch, of whom we read that he walked with God all the days of his life. Throughout all the ages there have been such saints who had this mystical intercourse with God eternal. They did not let themselves be led aside through worldly cares, but put their communion with God above all else.

Abraham is another example. In his case we see that the Lord also gave His full confidence to him. We have in mind the words He spoke as He was on His way to Sodom and Gomorrah: "Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do?"

God took the father of the faithful into His confidence. He revealed to him what no one else

yet knew. He spoke to him as to a trustworthy friend, and unfolded His plans. The secret of the Lord was granted here in an unusual measure to the man who feared Him.

From the nature of the case this was exceptional.

Abraham occupied an extraordinary position.

But the Lord does not grant, even to His most intimate friends, a glance into His secret counsel, since He has revealed everything that we need for our salvation and guidance in His Word.

It is therefore in vain that men expect to learn anything of God, through secret fellowship with Him, what has not been revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The right insight into the Word of God however; the clear conception of what He is; His purpose with His church in particular, and with mankind in general, are found only through quiet fellowship with God. Then we also get a correct appreciation of God's way in the history of the world, and in the experiences of individual persons. In a word, we learn to comprehend His deeds of mercy, patience and justice. Such blessings are ours if we practice the presence of God.

Anyone who knows something of this intimacy with the Lord will gladly admit that his knowledge of spiritual values has greatly increased with this

privileged fellowship. His insight is more keen. He understands the **Word** of God better, because he has learned to know the **heart** of God better in his personal experiences. And this alone is a growth in grace that is not to be minimized.

Especially is this true of the experiential knowledge of the saving work of God's grace in the soul. We read in the twenty-fifth psalm not only that the secret of the Lord is for them that fear Him, but also that "He will show them His covenant." That refers to the secrets of the covenant of grace, the secrets of salvation, therefore.

O, indeed, God has revealed them in His Word.

But this knowledge is enriched through the intimacy of secret fellowship with Him. Day by day He leads us into richer, experiential knowledge of the heart, which is quite different from having a correct view of His ways. Through His truth-teaching Spirit He does indeed make our sins known unto us, and reveals them to us in their hideousness as we had not seen them before. But He also makes us know better than before, what are the riches of His grace in Christ for all those that love Him. He lets us taste that He, the Lord, is gracious.

God then not only gives us the comfort of the forgiveness of sins, but also makes known His pro-

tecting faithfulness, which keeps us from falling. And when we approach life's end with expiring breath, He, with His own hand, draws aside the veil that separates time from eternity, and reveals to us the glory of our heavenly home.

Is not the secret fellowship with God then the most blessed way of Growing in grace?

With All The Saints

XI

WITH ALL THE SAINTS

WE have mentioned various ways in which we may acquire a harmonious development of the life of grace.

In this chapter we would add the admonition to hold in honor the communion of the saints, of which our apostolic confession speaks, and to seek such with all diligence. For without that communion we will surely have a withered spiritual life. Without it our inner life will surely shrivel. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that we can only apprehend the breadth, and length, and height, and depth of the love of Christ, in company with all the saints. This must therefore be impossible if we separate ourselves from the other saints, as the Bible calls the believers, even though they would fain call themselves sinners.

This fact is easily explained.

If we had been created as so many separate entities, without any living connection with the millions of men, we would not need each other for the development of our gifts and powers. All human beings would have many traits of similarity.

But the inner relationship would be lacking. Every one would be living, as it were, on some glass non-conductor. And that would cut off the possibility of giving spiritual and moral strength to one another.

Every one for himself . . . . . That would be the motto in a world in which the individual would be the one and only consideration, and in which there would be no room for the exercise of fellowship. We would all be strangers to each other. From necessity we might unite externally to attain certain purposes. But that would not be a real, inner unity, coming from our nature. It would be a manufactured, not a living unity.

God has made the human race from one blood however. We are inwardly related to one another. In our pluriformity we constitute a unity, an organic unity, as a tree with its many branches coming forth from one root, is one coherent whole. One life originates in the roots and flows through the trunk to the utmost branch.

In like manner the human race is a plant of the Lord. It originated with our first parents, and has spread in many persons over all the world.

It is not to be surprised at, therefore, that any one who separates himself from his fellow men in his daily life, because he feels self-sufficient, has

the lot of a broken twig. He loses his freshness. His talents shrivel. His will gradually become weak. He loses all power of initiative, and his undeveloped character shows the traces of such solitariness. Not in isolation, but in the full flowing stream of life, full-grown personalities are formed.

The same truth holds for the realm of faith.

Even in a much higher sense.

For we must not only consider the general, social disposition of mankind, but above all the spiritual unity of which the physical unity is the basis.

The church of the saints is represented in Scripture with the figure of a body of which Jesus Christ is the inspiring Head. The one member is the active hand, the other the quick foot, the third the watching eye, and the fourth the listening ear. Therefore not one member can say to another: "I have no need of thee." One member alone can do but little. But working together the members can accomplish much, especially since the same life pulsates through them. The apostle refers to this when he admonishes the church to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all." Eph. 4.

Immediately succeeding these beautiful words we find the explanation of Paul, which shows how necessary the fellowship with the brethren is. "But unto each one of us was the grace given according to the measure of the gift of Christ."

Every one of us receives in the way of faith the full grace of redemption, the forgiveness of sins, sanctification, and the hope of glory. In that respect the one is not privileged above the other. The one is not less saved than the other, neither in this life nor in the life to come. All share the complete salvation which Christ has wrought.

Yet there is a difference.

A difference in the measure of the spiritual gifts.

There are believers who are far ahead of their brethren in knowledge of the Scriptures. They have a keener insight into the truth than the majority. They do not parade these gifts, but serve others with them. Next to them stand the disciples who have received in an unusual measure the grace-gift of prayer. On the wings of their petitions they take the souls of others upward to heaven. And as long as they do not become self-conscious of their gifts they can enrich the souls of others.

Other members of the church have the gift of

prophecy in an unusual measure. We love to listen to them when they explain the Word of God in a smaller or larger circle of friends, and make fine applications of the truth for daily life. Nor must we forget those who excel in emotional feelings, and have the charisma of love in a rich measure. From their hearts come the impulses to works of charity.

There are also those who can discern the spirits. Others whose sanctified will-power calls them to great activity in the Kingdom of God. And others again with whom the activity of a Martha remains in the background, while they delight in meditative quiet as a Mary.

So there are many gifts from the same Spirit.

All these grace-gifts are so many rays from the one Sun of grace. The one receives this ray, the other another. And this distinction is not altogether dependent on our natural ability, or education, or circumstances. All these factors count, of course. But all finally depends on the pleasure of our God. He gives his gifts to whom He will, or, as the apostle says, according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

We can readily understand that in such a household of God we can not come to full spiritual growth, if we flee the fellowship of our brethren,

and isolate ourselves in the circle of our own life.

Grace is many-sided and comprehensive. But each one of us is one-sided. If we remain alone we can but develop in one way, to the detriment of a harmonious, spiritual development. How much richer we will become in spiritual life, if we serve others with our special gifts, and are served in turn by their gifts. Interaction is necessary. In the domain of grace it is also true that iron is sharpened with iron.

If every one of the disciples would stand in the midst of the church as one that serves; if each one of us would serve without any haughtiness or as a judge of fellow-believers; serving with a conviction that in some other matter he would need the aid of his brother; and if brotherly love were the impulse to give heed to one another to further love and good works, no doubt, but there would be more full-grown men and fathers in Christ.

The complaint is raised that there is decay in spiritual life. That complaint is not altogether unfounded. There are many causes for this spiritual decline. But one cause is surely the neglect of the communion of saints in the sense in which we have described it. Of course, Christian people still meet. Often on the Lord's Day. And then they speak of empty and full churches, of short and long ser-

mons. But when do they speak of personal spiritual life? How little is said of the riches of Christ, of the preciousness of God's Word, and the way of salvation! How often must we not leave our friends with the feeling that our spiritual life has become poorer!

The communion of the saints is plainly decreasing.

To the detriment of spiritual life.

When the cross drew nigh the disciples scattered abroad for the moment, because the shepherd was slain. But on the Resurrection Day they grouped together again. And what did a Thomas not miss because he neglected the communion of the saints. He deprived himself of the comfort of Jesus' presence.

Only WITH ALL THE SAINTS can we receive what the Lord has prepared for those who trust in Him. Each one of us can receive but little of the waters of life. But when all the saints are united in love and peace our receptivity becomes the greater, and we will fully experience the length and the breadth, the height and the depth of the salvation God has prepared for us in Christ.

The communion of the saints is the fruitful ground in which the believer must remain planted for the growth of his spiritual life. Of course, we

must not avoid private devotions. We need the quiet hour for concentration. Jesus has spoken of the inner chamber with the door shut to the world. The man that is always among men fritters away his soul. But the man who is always alone lets it languish. The concentration of the quiet hour must be followed by the broadening influence of the communion of the saints, serving others, and being served.

Exercised Senses

XII

EXERCISED SENSES

THE various means that God has given for the growth of our spiritual life must be appropriated by EXERCISED SENSES.

Otherwise the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Lord's Supper, the practice of prayer and of the presence of God, will, in part at least, miss their purpose.

What do we mean by exercised senses?

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews uses the phrase when he contrasts the full-grown man of God with the babes that need milk. He says, "But solid food is for fullgrown men, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil."

Infants who are nourished at their mothers' breasts lack for the present the power to differentiate between good and bad food. But the adults have their senses, especially the sense of taste, exercised by the many foods they meet. In this way they learn to distinguish between palatable and unpalatable foods. Instinctively almost, they are warned against foods that hurt their health.

Everywhere we meet people who have exercised senses. The sailor has as a rule a fine vision because he is used to looking over vast spaces, while the student, who is ever bending over his books, finds that his eyes are weakened by their limited vision and need glasses. There are people with a fine sense of smell. Others can at once hear any lack of harmony. Others have an excellent sense of taste, while the blind have an astonishing sense of feeling. All such people have exercised their senses. Their powers of discernment have become a second nature.

This is also true of our spiritual life.

The soul of man has faculties to absorb impressions that come to it from without, and to express the sentiments that lie within. Man has a mind to think, a heart to love, a will to act, and, what is of more importance for our purpose, a conscience to decide between good and evil.

Every person has such a conscience, but its voice is more clear with the one than with the other. And for the development of our spiritual life it is necessary to exercise our conscience. We must instinctively shun whatever hinders our spiritual growth, and instinctively absorb whatever can aid our inner life.

Gymnastic exercises are referred to.

That is indeed the meaning of the original word. And we can but admire the choice of that word, for life is indeed an arena in which we must struggle to emerge as victors and receive the laurel wreaths.

In our daily life we meet checks without number.

What is worse, we are subject to all kinds of temptations, which often assume beautiful forms, and only reveal their true character after we have woefully succumbed to them. Then we are inclined to complain, and to ask why those angelic forms in which a devil lay hidden, had to cross our path.

This question can be answered in part by saying that such temptations came in order that our senses might be exercised to discern between good and evil. He who has never met an enemy will never be a valiant fighter. Moral Samsons are not born, but are formed in the battle of life. A bold spirit, a courageous mind, a solid character, hatred of evil and a desire for holiness are spiritual values that are gained by struggle, and richly reward our energies. Every victory which we may gain through the power of the Lord leads to the refining of our senses to distinguish between good and evil. When we meet Satan a second time we will instantly recognize him under his disguise as an angel of light.

If we are thus prepared by watching and praying we are less likely to succumb to some surprise attack. We recognize sin from afar, and with a prayer in the heart we are ready to resist unto blood. And the sin that wells up out of our own hearts will be checked by going at once to the Lord and praying Him for grace to resist the Evil one. No matter in what pleasant form sin may come we will keep it at a distance through a holy instinct.

Such exercised senses are necessary since sin often comes as some poison gas against which we are warned only by an exercised sense of smell. Many faithful disciples know this. They have often been engulfed through such stupefying gasses, which came down on them as so many evil powers in the air. And then they would wish that the Word of God were some kind of book of laws in which they could read what may and what may not be done.

This question often disturbs them. Peace is taken away, and the joy which can only be found when our soul is at liberty, flees from their anxious soul. They no longer enjoy the glorious liberty of the child of God, whose senses have been made keen through the purifying power of the Word, the sanctifying influence of prayer, the quiet trust in

the guidance of God, and the experiences in the battle of life.

These are some of the means by which our spiritual senses can be exercised. Whoever makes a grateful and diligent use of them develops. He will not notice that his conscience speaks more clearly, any more than the seaman notices that his eyes have become keener. But the results will prove it. We will have no trouble in deciding what may and what may not be done, not as the result of argument, but from spiritual intuition.

Take as an example the conventional lie. Many see no harm in having callers told that they are "not at home" when they wish to have a quiet and undisturbed afternoon to themselves. But the man of exercised senses feels at once that something is wrong with such a subterfuge. Why should he not tell the truth, and simply say that he prefers no visit today?

Another example can be taken from the question of conforming to the world.

There are many debatable questions. At least, people think so. The modern dress of women; bobbed hair; social entertainment. The Bible does not decide such questions directly. But persons whose senses are exercised know how far they may go with the fashion of the day. Not that we can use

some yardstick. But we intuitively reject what degrades, and accept what is in harmony with our profession as Christians.

Exercised senses cause us to avoid the men and women who by their attitude and daily conversation threaten our spiritual life and cause its tender buds to fall to the ground. Also all books that advocate false views which slowly but surely undermine the foundations of life. We shun everything that disturbs the inner harmony of our soul and breaks its balance, as sensational representations and pleasures. No one of fine taste in spiritual things is able to assimilate such coarse food. He instinctively repels it. He does not need any book of rules. He is as broadminded as Paul when he wrote: "All things are yours." But he also heeds the limitation of the apostle: "But ye are of Christ and Christ is God's!"

Our Reading Matter

XIII

OUR READING MATTER

FOR the development of our spiritual life we should give serious attention to our reading matter.

It takes a certain amount of courage to write about this. Reading is being relegated to the background in our day. In former days men were proud of their library, were it large or small. A personal joy was found in adding some volumes year after year. And no gift was more appreciated on a birthday than a fine book. And when old age had come the books revealed a steady growth of mind. From the books of childhood there had been an advance to the books of adolescence, and then the books had come for the mature mind, often the popular editions of the classics, which have a message for all ages and peoples.

In such a time there is quiet inner growth.

Now life has become so busy that there is no time left for a large book. If a subject has been treated in a small brochure we may spend half an hour in flighty perusal. Then we are somewhat posted on the questions of the day and can keep

up our end of the conversation as people of civilization and culture!

But who would search through a heavy tome? The majority of people are too busy seeking a harmonious development of the body than that they should give serious attention to the growth of their minds. And not a few young people have time only for the sporting page. We are often astonished at their ignorance about world affairs.

Now we would not condemn gymnastics. We would even advocate them in moderation. But we have an open eye for the danger that our coming generation will be all body, while the light of the mind begins to look like a smoking flax.

We have the radio. In a certain sense it is a competitor of the publisher, and in our times of spiritual depression a competitor that is not easily met. Thanks to that wonderful invention many get food for their minds who hardly ever read a book. Fortunately all the owners of a radio are not lovers of jazz and comedy. Thousands listen to serious discussions, scientific lectures, and even sermons. But no matter how grateful we may be for such instruction, it will never cling to our minds as that which we learn through quiet reading.

Reading is usually more fruitful than hearing. Then we do not just hear the sound of a spoken

word, that soon disappears in space, but have the printed, enduring word before our eyes. It is retained better by the memory. If some sentence strikes our attention we can wait a moment and let the thought sink in, while with the spoken word the one thought often displaces the other.

Outside of the means of grace which we have discussed there is nothing that so aids the upbuilding of our spiritual life as good literature, while nothing is so harmful as bad books. The well known phrase: a man IS what he EATS, is especially true of the spiritual food that is given in books and magazines. It becomes part of our mind.

We do not notice this at once. But as drops of water hollow out a rock so we receive an ever deeper impression of what we read. We appropriate the ideas that we meet with daily, and for which we may even have felt some apprehension at first. As we can accustom our bodies to everything, even to poison, so we can also become accustomed to the poisonous ideas that we meet with every day, and may even approve of them in the end.

That is, of course, most evident with sensational books because these have the quickest results. Juvenile courts often reveal that children

go out to commit crimes with knife and revolver because they have absorbed stories of violence from the cheap novels of the day. They will sometimes rob their own parents. Less suitable for publicity are the experiences which are met as a result of the baleful influences of pornographic literature on the minds of boys and girls. Authorities often demand the examination of the satchels and lockers of pupils, because dirty leaflets are distributed from hand to hand, and many a young mind is corrupted.

These few remarks show what a blessing fine books can be for the development of our spritual life. We are not only thinking of religious literature as sermons and meditations. Surely these are profitable. In days of sickness or when we are kept from public worship by circumstances beyond our control we can receive a rich blessing from them. That is also true for the aged and infirm. But we cannot always be reading such books, any more than the reading of the Bible alone would be sufficient for us in our times.

Life is large and overwhelming.

There are the problems of Labor and Sociology, of National and International Politics, of Law and Justice, which latter are undermined by a false philosophy that would make all law vacillate with

the subjective opinions of the times. We also meet the questions of Science, either in accordance with the Word of God or hostile to all Divine Revelation. Then Art is discussed, which some would divorce from all moral considerations, forgetting that in the final analysis only the holy is beautiful. We study History, either as the manifestation of blind laws of cause and effect, or as it develops through the guiding hand of God. Then there is great difference of opinion about Marriage, the Home, Education and many other questions about which me must needs have fixed opinions, or we will not know how to wend our way through the labyrinths of life.

Such questions are not discussed in scientific works only. They are presented in novels and short stories, often in entertaining form. Many novels have a philosophy of life which the mass of men will appreciate above their literary value. So it is plain that our Christian life must be strengthened by books which defend our Christian principles, while avoiding moralizing and catechising.

Through healthy Christian literature we become strong. We learn to distinguish between good and bad. We realize to what disastrous ends false moral standards will lead. And we also realize what blessings follow from walking in the right

way prescribed in God's Word. Choice books will make us men and women of rectitude. We will not swerve to the right or to the left.

But then the books must be WELL read.

And that takes patience and self denial.

The rapid perusal of the pages to reach the end of the book and lay it aside for another is totally fruitless. But little is retained in the memory. As hastily eaten food it remains an undigested mass in our minds. Every book should be a banquet. Take your time. Taste its thoughts. Enjoy your spiritual repast leisurely. Let the ideas impregnate your soul. Revolve the words in quiet as a Mary pondered on the words of the shepherds, cherishing them in her heart. Then you will experience that it matters little whether you have read MUCH, but matters much that you have read WELL.

God's Guidance

XIV

GOD'S GUIDANCE

WE HAVE seen that our spiritual growth is to a certain extent a matter of self-development. We can use or neglect the means that God has placed at our disposal, though the desire to use them must come from above through the secret work of the Spirit.

Our inward growth is also determined, however, by factors which are beyond our control. The great Builder is ceaselessly busy with His work on the life of our soul, even when we are not the least conscious of that fact.

We would first mention the milieu, the surroundings, of our life.

We do not choose our dwellingplace but are born in a certain family without any choice on our part. A Higher Hand has placed us there. It is the inscrutable counsel of God which decides that the one is born in a pious home, while another grows up among people who are without God in the world.

It is, of course, true that we can serve the Lord at all places and under all the conditions of life.

A young man who spends his life in the army or navy can no doubt remain true to God in those rough surroundings. We admit with gratitude that many do not deny, but boldly confess their Saviour there, and elsewhere. And happy experiences prove that people may be touched by the spirit of God in thoroughly godless communities.

But such are to be compared to brands snatched from the burning.

These exceptions cannot nullify the truth that a sanctifying influence comes from a godly home which can hardly be overestimated. Life is more refined there than in worldly circles. The conversation is seasoned with the salt of the gospel. The mental climate is healthier. The air purer. The morals and customs bear the stamp of holiness. Men and women are formed who do not lose themselves in the things of time, but have an open eye for the unseen things.

Without doubt sins and shortcomings are found in such homes also. There is no reason for self-satisfaction and still less for pride. Yet an atmosphere is lived in which helps build spiritual life, while a worldly milieu loosens stone after stone. We have cause to thank our God if we have been born in a believing home. On every hand we find support for our wavering steps, if the parents, at

least, are not strangers to the hearts of their children. A sanctified home does not create the new life that is born of God, but does at least furnish the trellis along which the weak branches of the vine may climb.

Then we may think of the circumstances of life.

This phrase is really ill chosen. Just as we see the hand of God in the choice of the family in which we have been placed, we see it in every experience. We are not in the power of a haphazard, fortuitous combination of impersonal circumstances. In back of every experience we notice the guiding hand of God. Or, as we read in the Bible, herb and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things come not by chance but from His fatherly hand.

If that is correct then all things will work together for the spiritual development of those that love God, who are called according to His purpose. Among ALL things we should number first of all the comomn daily events to which we as a rule give but little attention. We usually have an open eye for disastrous events, or happy surprises, and try to see their meaning for our spiritual life. But the fact is that the daily events have a far greater influence on us. Festivities and mourning are usu-

ally brief moments in our existence. They are indeed more tumultuous, and for the moment make a deep impression. But a swelling flood that soon ebbs away does not have the lasting effect of drops of water which hollow out a stone.

The little things in life are a means in God's hand to build and purify our life. We find a striking illustration of this in Jeremiah's description of the work of the potter. This artist takes the pliable clay and throws it on the wheel. The wheel spins ceaselessly in its little orbit. But during this spinning of the wheel the potter forms his beautiful vase by little touches of hand and fingers.

In just that way the great Potter deals with us. Our life is in many respects but a monotonous circle of events. Always the same work. Every morning the same journey to the factory, the school, the office. Every noon our lunch. Every evening the same company of man, wife and children. We secretly complain of the monotony of life.

Let us not forget, however, that the great Potter is busy forming us after his image on the whirling wheel of common events. In every experience we are to recognize the touch of the supreme Artist. God loves to work with little

touches for our spiritual development, but he works the live long day. He does not need complicated machinery to make us vessels of honor in his temple. A common wheel, and the touch of his fingers, are enough.

When we have this view of life we see its rich significance. Many a one is inclined to deny any value to his life because nothing remarkable takes place. It seems so purposeless to be busy in the same things day after day. Especially must many women pass weeks, months, and years, at monotonous household tasks. And many artisans find their hours occupied at work that they can dream. In the offices young men must sit day after day at a desk counting endless figures. In the banks we see them handling money without variation. In the factories many spend the whole day at one machine. And the farmer must ever till the same ground.

How monotonous it seems!

But the clay becomes a beautiful vase fit for a palace!

We must have an open eye for the beauty of the commonplace. God uses it to ennoble and refine our inward life. We must not ask ironically how daily monotony can develop inner life. We learn

trustworthiness, honesty, zeal, persistence, and self-denial, through the daily task, and such virtues adorn any character.

These virtues are not acquired through striking events. If we are suddenly placed before some gigantic task we may excel ourselves and do more than we thought possible. But then reaction comes. The man who fought so boldly will often be a weakling later. It proved that his heroism was fleeting. The noblest characteristics are formed through the daily events with which the modelling hand of the Potter forms us on the wheel of life.

Life is never a monotonous spinning of the wheel only.

The guiding hand of God is always present.

If we see this then the dull prose of life becomes poetry. We no longer ask what work WE do, but ask the more important question, what **God** does with us.

It is often difficult to attain to this Biblical view of life.

Clay is pliable. It yields to the hand of the potter. We are often unpliable and refractory, and try to hinder the work of the heavenly Potter, when he develops our life. May the Lord make us

submissive and obedient, willing to accede to his will. Then we are kept from looking with condescension on the monotony of life. And if sometimes we feel dissatisfied, we will conquer our dissatisfaction in the strength of the Lord. We know that if we cast aside the monotony of the wheel of life, we are avoiding the hand of the Artist, who is modelling us after his image.

Our Suffering

XV

OUR SUFFERING

ALL the experiences through which God leads us aid our spiritual development.

That is true also of the common events of every day. It is quite possible that our daily experiences with their prosaic monotony have the greatest effect on our life. They recur again and again to chisel, smooth, and even scour our personality, while the unusual events of each life can easily be counted.

Yet we would give some extra thought to the sufferings of life, of which each human being receives his share.

No doubt the joys of life can also have their part in the development of our character. That is even the purpose why God scatters joys on our pathway. But the fact remains that the noblest children of God do not dwell on the sunnyside, but on the shadowside of life's thoroughfare. Excessive light will often blind the eyes for the heavenly things. Moses knew this when he sang of Jeschurun, who kicked back, and rebelled against God when he became fat.

The proverbial expressions of the common people testify to the same idea. Milk must be churned before we have butter. The palm tree flourishes when weighted down. Heavy weights are necessary for a fine clock. And an English poet has said: "Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, where wealth accumulates, and men decay."

We dare not say that the sufferings of life bear for each person the peaceful fruits of righteousness. Sorrow goes with heavy tread through the world, and does not pass a single home, not even the homes that have the mark of the blood of the Lamb on the posts of the door. But sorrow is not received in every home as a messenger of God.

Instead of listening to its message in reverence many a one rises in rebellion against God Almighty, at least, if he still believes that there is a God who rules over all. Or else men will clench their teeth together in stoical pride so that no complaint comes over the lips. They seem to be hewn from stone. Such were the men of whom a Jeremiah wrote: "O Jehovah, do not thine eyes look upon truth? Thou hast stricken them, but they were not grieved; thou hast consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction: they have made their faces harder than a rock; they have refused to return."

In the circle of the living church the sorrows of life may not have such hardening results. It is indeed true that even an upright believer may for the time being be stubborn. But he will not remain indifferent and hard. Beneath the chastening hand of the Lord he soon realizes how sinful such an attitude is. He feels ashamed of his rebellion and confesses it as sin. He prays for forgiveness, and asks his God to give him the proper view of the sorrows he endures.

The right view, — so hard to acquire!

Sorrow is not sent that we should forget it as soon as possible. There are "miserable comforters" as a Job declared, who, after they have hastily spoken a few words of commiseration, try to cheer the grief-stricken in a way that shows little serious-mindedness.

We may not succumb to our sorrow, they say. We should be courageous. Life has its demands. Try to divert your mind. If you go out among people you will soon take delight in living again. That is the best way to conquer the troubles of life!

But that would be a victory without a battle.

Such advice really means that you should forget your sorrow, instead of looking at it as an

entrusted talent with which you are to make gain for time and eternity.

No doubt some diversion is wholesome. But if its purpose is only to make you forget your pain, it is nothing else than a narcotic. In its essence it is on one line with the desire to drown sorrow in strong drink after coming from the cemetery, and so forget the misery of life. We can stupefy ourselves with other means than with alcohol. We can do it with diversion, visiting, trips, and even with work. Many learned men try to forget their grief with assiduous study.

But we MAY NOT try to forget our grief.

Then we are trying to flee from sorrow.

Grief should not make us impotent for the daily task. But that is something quite different from trying to evade sorrow by work, even by work in the kingdom of God. We should rather enquire what lesson sorrow is to teach.

We need have no doubt as to the answer to that question.

All the smart of life is a means in God's hand to purify the silver from the dross. That is the testimony of the Word of God, and this testimony has been verified by the experience of thousands who have received this blessing. The Lord does not afflict willingly, or from the heart, as the

Hebrew has it so beautifully. (Jer. 3:33) God is not cruel as though he delighted in creating pain. He would love to open his hands with benefits and cheer our path with unlimited light. He can not do this, however, because there is still so much evil in us, which keeps the spiritual life that He has given from shining in its full luster.

In this dispensation we are not perfect, but are ever striving to reach the ideal for which we have been laid hold on by Christ. The various things that depress our spiritual life, as worldliness, fleshly lusts, having our mind completely occupied with our daily work, and above all, the sin which easily besets us, and often causes us to stumble as we run our race, behold, these are so many things that must be removed by the grace of Christ. Christ alone must live in us, and therefore He uses the refining fire of sorrow.

In the furnace of suffering the silver is purified. Everything is removed that is displeasing to the Lord. The world loses its charm. The losses we suffer, the sicknesses we endure, the poverty that depresses, are so many means in the hand of the Lord to detach us from the world, and cause us to seek Him as the Highest Good, the prize possession, that can never be taken away.

Sorrow refines.

We are refined also in this sense that we learn to recognize God as the Giver of every good gift. We then become more tenderly grateful. We are more humble of heart and mind, and milder in our judgment of men. We have a revulsion of evil and a growing hunger and thirst for righteousness and holiness.

Suffering is God's way to perfection.

That way is hard.

Let it be!

It is the only way. On that dark path we learn complete submission to the will of God, which is something quite different than being resigned because we cannot change matters. It is the surrender of a noble soul that says with David: "Behold, here am I, let Him do to me as seemeth good unto Him!"

Even the Son of man has learned this tender obedience through suffering. And the servant is not more than his Master. Why should we then complain when the Lord plants a garden of suffering in our lives where our soul is exceeding sorrowful, and the bloody drops of sweat come?

Suffering deepens our life.

We can soon see in a man's conduct whether he has walked in life's dark shadows. Frivolity has made place for serious-mindedness, which has

nothing in common with somberness and pessimism. On the contrary, many cross bearers go through life with a shining face. That is because they are independent of external joys, since they have a fountain of happiness within, which at times illuminates their faces. They have fathomed something of the depths of life's sea. And they can have an indulgent smile for the men and women who sail on the surface without any idea of the mysterious depths over which they glide.

They that suffer can therefore comfort those that mourn.

He whose eyes are filled with tears does not go to the flighty souls that have never fathomed the depths of life. He grips the hand of the man who has been in the furnace of affliction. He knows that that man can sympathize, can suffer with, as Paul writes about the God of all comfort: "Who comforteth us in all our affliction, that WE may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction, through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

Sorrow educates therefore.

The fruit of suffering is only gradually seen. It is a super-pious flirting with grief, if we welcome it with the thought that it ennobles us. The Holy Scriptures are more sober and true. According to

Scripture we must indeed reverently accept sorrow from the hand of God. We may not avoid it. But the Bible honestly adds these words to the admonition that we must not regard lightly the chastening of the Lord: "All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet AFTERWARD it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness."

Automatic Growth

XVI

AUTOMATIC GROWTH

WE HAVE been discussing the various means that aid our inner development. Some of these were the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments. Others were the common and extraordinary events in our life from which a developing influence goes out on our soul.

Now we wish to investigate the **character** of our spiritual growth. How must we picture the development and growth of our spiritual life? We can not be satisfied with the answer that this is a work of God's grace. We desire to know this work of grace better, and, as far as possible, trace its course.

Jesus approves this desire.

What is more, he meets it through his teaching. In one of his parables he teaches that the kingdom of God on a large scale, and the human heart on a small scale, have a growth similar to that of seed in the ground. We read, "So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed upon the earth; and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, he knoweth not

how. The earth beareth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the fruit is ripe, straightway he putteth forth the sickle, because the harvest is come." Mark 4:26-30.

Here you have in brief the process that is made by a seed of grain from sowing to reaping. By analogy you will have some light on the growth of spiritual life. This also grows by God's power from a living seed, the Word of God. It is therefore necessary that the word of grace be not only cast on the soil of the heart, but that it also sink into it.

In another parable Jesus has taught us that the seed can not ripen if it falls on the hardbeaten footpath; nor when it sinks into the earth, but strikes a layer of rock; nor when it falls among thorns as it is then choked in its growth. But if the seed falls into good earth, into an open, longing heart, it will take root and shoot up. It will root in the heart, and flourish in life, as blade and ear shoot up from the earth.

Jesus gives three characteristics of this growth. In this chapter we will consider the first: "The earth beareth fruit of herself."

We must realize at once that the earth does not produce the plant. It does not even produce thorns and thistles. The seed must be put into the earth,

either by man, or through the wind or some other agency. When we therefore read that the earth bears fruit of herself we must bear in mind the preceding words, that a man cast seed upon the earth. Then the earth of herself or automatically (automaté, as the original has it) brings forth the fruit. The farmer need pay no further attention to it. HIS work is done and the work of GOD begins. Only when the grain is ripe is there work for the farmer again. But in the interval between sowing and reaping he can do nothing to advance its growth. He must leave all to God. God must give sun and rain. The husbandman goes his own way, sleeping and rising, night and day.

This truth about automatic growth is a word of comfort.

If the beginning of spiritual life is in your soul, and you use the means of grace, you have no need to be anxious about your spiritual growth. It is automatic. Of course you want to see the principles of spiritual life develop. You are not satisfied with your present attainment, since you yearn for perfection. The farmer will watch the field to see if the green sprouts have appeared. But he knows that it takes time. Even though he does not see it, he knows that the seed is germinating in the dark earth. Therefore he is not upset when

he sees the barren field. He comforts himself with the truth that it takes time for the plant to shoot forth, and then sleeps and rises.

How anxious tender hearts can be about their advance on the way to life eternal! They have no patience to await the harvest season, but want to be pillars in the kingdom of God in a moment, not realizing that they are still in the period of swaying stalks. The farmer who would tear up the ground to see whether the seed has taken root would play the fool. But it is just as foolish to be digging into your soul to see how far you have advanced in the knowledge of the truth.

You can do nothing about it,— that is the law of growth. You must let God work in secret. Growth is automatic. You must temper your impatience, and consider the lilies, how they grow without any spinning, and are yet clothed in more than Salmonic glory.

Lead a carefree life,— which is quite different from a careless life. All your interference with the seed hinders its growth and may spoil the harvest. Do your work, use the means, and have no care for the future. Say with the Psalmist: "The LORD will perfect that which concerneth me."

The automatic character of our growth also

comforts us since it absolutely condemns all salvation by works.

Christianity has suffered through all the ages from spiritual over-emphasis. Men would take means of their own choosing, rather than the God-given ones, to advance in holiness and grace. Many would lead the life of hermits, forgetting that we may flee from the world WITHOUT, but can not escape the world WITHIN, where the greatest dangers lie.

Still worse, some men would in this way contradict the gospel. The gospel does not call us to leave the world, but calls us to the far more difficult task of overcoming the world. In His Highpriestly prayer Jesus asks His Father: "I pray not that thou shouldest take them from the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one."

Penances, devotions, pilgrimages, retreats,—they may have value for some natures, but always remain a self-willed service, the work of man's hand, and the work of man's hand is helpless to aid growth.

Of course, certain results can be reached. Penance and fasting can aid a man in fighting a certain sin. But it remains the amateurish work of man. And we sometimes see that when men have driven out one devil for the time being, that devil

will return with seven other devils, so that the last of such a man is worse than the first.

Growth can not be forced by artificial means.

Growth excludes willful purpose. All exertion to climb higher on the ladder of holiness will appear fruitless in the end. The plant does not even notice its own growth. Nor does the human body. Only the results of growth can be seen in the fruits of development. And that is also true of the growth of spiritual life. The seed shoots forth automatically, naturally, and simply, without any external pressure or exertion. The kingdom of God is not a noisy factory, but a quiet garden in which the believers grow in depth and in height, automatically.

Gradual Growth

XVII

GRADUAL GROWTH

IN the foregoing chapter we have seen that the man in the parable simply cast the seed into the ground, and then went his daily way of sleeping and rising. In the meanwhile the seed grew up, he knew not how. As explanation we are told that the earth bears fruit of herself, or automatically. And then as a second characteristic we are told that there is a gradual growth, first the blade, then the ear, and then the full grain in the ear.

We will now consider this gradual growth.

In our spiritual development we meet with a slowly advancing growth that sometimes tries our patience. This truth is not always kept in mind nor comprehended by all. We meet well meaning people who think it is sufficient to believe in Christ, and be converted from the realm of darkness to God's wonderful light. They draw a sharp line of demarcation between the converted and unconverted, the believing and unbelieving, and then all is said. They do not seem to realize that the inner renewal, that comes to expression in conversion, is not the end but the beginning of a gradual development.

They do not believe that among the believers there are degrees of development, and that the life of faith is not only a resting in Christ, but is also a life of intense energy, going from strength to strength.

We are, or we are not, converted.

All further differentiation seems nonsense to some people.

Then the converted would be like the miraculous gourd of which we read in the book of Jonah, a fullgrown tree in a single night. But that was not an ordinary tree, and can not be used as a comparison for believers. The origin and the decay of that tree were contrary to the natural laws of creation. If you would understand the development of spiritual life you must make your observations among the natural order of things. Jesus compares it to the growing seed that a farmer casts into the ground.

Ripe, spiritual personalities are not a hurried, hot-house production. They also are subject to the common laws of growth for plants, animals, body and mind. None of these is full grown at birth. It would therefore be strange if such were the case in spiritual life. Here also however we have three phases, the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear.

First the blade.

The farmer rejoices when he first sees a green carpet spreading over the land. But before he saw it God had been working. The seed germinated beneath the soil. But now a life full of promise appears. Under favorable circumstances the little blades will develop into the full-grown grain of the harvest.

This is a beautiful picture of the growing spiritual life of God's children. Under normal circumstances, with a Christian training, the seed of the Word will shoot forth in the years of childhood, when the body also is like the green blade.

It is one of the happy surprises God gives to parents and teachers when they see the first expressions of religious feeling come forth from their children's hearts. They may be but timid expressions: asking about God and Jesus, about good and evil, about heaven and its angels. It is sometimes quite touching to see these little heads puzzle about the great problems of an inscrutable Providence. And in worldly families they have not the least conception how a little formulary prayer that was memorized in infancy, can develop into a prayer of the child's own thought and wording, as it pleads for some one who is sick, or in trouble, without having been told to do so.

It takes the keen eyes of love to discern this first growth of the green blade on the field of a child's heart. And remember that this tender shoot can easily be hurt. A harsh word, or a mocking laugh, can do as much damage as heavy boots in the green grain. Be tender to those little hearts when they begin to express themselves. Help them with their crude questions. In a word, reverence the work of God's grace!

Then the ear.

This is the second phase and often coincides with the age of adolescence. Those years are full of unrest. It is the most difficult, as well as the most promising age of man. It is often decisive, since the course of future years is then laid out. They are the years of puberty, when the boy becomes a man.

Our spiritual life is influenced thereby, even thought the decisions for good and evil are not always made at that time. Youth seeks a point of departure from which its inner life can develop, though, sad to say, it often seeks it in its own way. Youth will object to submission to the Word of God, even though it feels that that Word grips the conscience and in that very fact proves to be Divine Truth with its royal authority.

It is to be regreted that during these years of

development many parents are strangers to the inner life of their boys and girls. We know that just in those years the mind prefers to close its borders to others. But love will always remain the key to open youthful hearts. It may not be easy, but too much is involved than that we should give up the attempt to gain the confidence of our children, and share their problems. Just a word of comprehension can sometimes work miracles. At any rate, it is far more effective than a haughty judgment on the doubts that arise in the heart that is becoming self-conscious. Whoever takes that attitude has himself to blame if the hearts of his children close hermetically at his presence. They then find no light with their own father and mother, who do not even understand their spiritual struggle.

Rather give those fine children of yours an aiding hand to help them through the difficult years. Let them tell you what troubles them. Jesus listened to the doubts of the men of Emmaus. And He endured much of the conceited Simon, who ever thought that he knew better. Do not forget to pray for your children with their tumultous minds. And when the Lord gradually establishes their character, as they walk the way to life eternal, they may not yet have reached their final development,

but the ear grows, and that harbors a great promise.

Then the full grain in the ear.

That is the end of the process of growth.

It refers to maturity in spiritual life as far as this is possible on earth. No one is fully ripe on this side of the grave. Only when we have crossed the borders of eternity will that which is partial have passed away, and will the time of full grown spiritual life have come. But by way of comparison a maturity is reached in this life, which far surpasses the period of the blade and the ear. Then balance has come in our spiritual life. Then we quietly trust in the Lord, instead of being thrown hither and thither by endless questions. Then we bear the grain that can feed hungry hearts. We have definite convictions in matters of faith, a mature knowledge of God's Truth and of spiritual life, an encouraging experience gained by reverently walking with God, and we lead a life of prayer, which proves that it is GOOD for us to draw nigh unto God.

This is the highest phase in our spiritual life.

It produces a firm fear of God.

Let us not make too much then of adolescent youth, as if it had already attained the goal. Surely,the ear is full of promise. But the fulfill-

ment of the promise is found only in the grain in the ear. And that comes later. With the one sooner than with the other, since we cannot measure this growth with definite years. But however this may be, the ripened godliness of the mature Christians is worth more than the beautiful blade and ear of youth.

We must not forget this in our day when youth is almost worshipped. Otherwise youth may degenerate in self-appreciation, thinking that the splendid ear has the value of nourishing bread.

Inscrutable Growth

XVIII

INSCRUTABLE GROWTH

WE have seen in the previous chapters that the spiritual growth of a sanctified personality is both automatic and gradual.

Automatic, since from our human viewpoint it is like the earth bringing forth the plant "from herself." And gradual, since spiritual, as well as natural growth, is not magical, nor by leaps and bounds, but an almost invisible advance, according to the law: first the seed, then the ear, and then the full grain in the ear.

The same parable also points to another characteristic.

The farmer may notice that the seed comes above the ground and after sometime ripens in the harvest. But it is all a mystery. "He knows not how." And these last words tell us that spiritual growth is inscrutable.

Inscrutable. Unsearchable. Many find it hard to accept that dictum.

We are born searchers, investigators.

There can be no phenomenon of any importance or we wish to give it a microscopic investigation.

Of course, there are superficial souls who take things just as they are. They feel no need to investigate the origin and purpose of things. But many others are not satisfied till they have a clear conception of the origin, the development, and the consummation of the things they come in contact with. The soul of man is so made that it wants to know the secrets of creation. We have no peace of mind till we know what light, air, electricity, etc., are. We want to know their essence and characteristics. The mind has been busy through the ages trying to solve the problems of life.

It is not surprising therefore that many earnest efforts are made to solve the great riddle of spiritual growth. And without doubt, the science of psychology, which makes the human soul the object of its research, has made astounding discoveries. We now have a much better knowledge of the human mind with its many idiosyncrasies. What men and women who read their Bible knew long ago, has now been established in a scientific way. In its spiritual growth the soul can traverse a whole scale of moods. It can be filled with anxiety, doubt, and dispair. And it can also be filled with joy and quiet confidence. The soul has both good and evil inclinations, which sometimes cause a terrific inner struggle. We now know that the soul

of a man is differently constituted than that of a woman, while the soul of a child also has something unique about it, a fact which must be borne in mind in a child's education. But though our knowledge of the reactions of the human mind is greatly increased, the spiritual growth of man is and remains an enigma, notwithstanding.

Growth is a miracle and therefore inscrutable.

The growth of a blade of grass is just as great a marvel as that of the royal rose. All the combined human intelligence is not able to cause the growth of a single plant. We can build beautiful cathedrals by piling stone upon stone. But it is beyond our power to grow a single leaf either on a green or barren twig. In the most absolute sense it is true therefore, that it is God who giveth the increase.

Growth is really a continuation of creation, for the innate possibilities of creation become actualities through growth. Since creation is the prerogative of God, such is also true of all natural and spiritual growth. We may aid or check growth by causing either favorable or unfavorable conditions, but the growth of our spiritual life remains just as unfathomable a mystery as its creation.

No one need take us at our word.

We would mention Jesus' words to Nicodemus.

Jesus not only tells him about the origin of spiritual life, as many think, but also about its growth. These are His words: "The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

The last sentence is the main one for our discussion. Sometimes the wind is as a soft summer zephyr, and then again as a roaring hurricane. But you can not decide whence it comes and whither it goes. Nor can you regulate its course, not even in our day when so many forces of nature have been put under discipline. The wind is a miracle. "So," says Jesus, "is every one that is born of the Spirit." Every regenerated man is a miracle in his origin and in his development. He can not be explained from natural causes.

This refers only to spiritual life.

The natural life of mind, heart, and will may sometimes develop in a marvelous way, even without the influence of grace. We all have met men who could not be called brethren in the Lord, since they were indifferent to the Saviour of the world. Yet they would excel in character qualities, in striving after high ideals, in honesty of conduct, and in warmth of feeling. We see in them the natural man at his best. And we sometimes feel

ashamed and envious when we compare him to the spiritual man at his worst.

No doubt such fine personalities are a blessing to humankind. It is spiritual arrogance to look upon them as worthless chaff while looking at ourselves as fine wheat. They do indeed lack the one necessary thing to be saved, but they are not useless in the great garden of humanity. Whatever good they may have done, will in the end be for the benefit of the kingdom of God, and will furnish building material for Jerusalem.

But this rich growth of the natural qualities of heart and mind is not miraculous. It is the product of various factors which, if we but knew them, would make such personalities comprehensible to us. Blood counts, for who has not heard of the power of heredity? And who does not know that some families excel in fine characters? As an example we would mention the house of Orange, the royal family of the Netherlands.

Then the surroundings in which we have been raised have their effect. The good example of others. The fellowship with cultured minds. Our reading matter. Moral exertion, trying to reach perfection. When we think of all these influences we can somewhat comprehend the striking words:

"I am a fragment of everything I have met in life!"

Natural growth is not unsearchable.

But spiritual growth is.

Characters can in a certain sense be bred.

Living Christians can not be bred.

Circumstances, descent, parentage, surroundings, may also partially affect their growth, these factors are not decisive. We often see men of spiritual power arise and develop in surroundings which, according to our estimation, must choke their souls. But they grow under the most adverse circumstances. They are not a link in the chain of their generations, but make a new beginning, and follow a new line of development. They grow, BUT DO NOT KNOW HOW.

Such development is possible because it is the work of God's grace. We know that we can not check up God. His ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. And when those Divine thoughts are realized in our growth, we are facing a miracle. And we confess that it is inscrutable.

Harmonious Growth

XIX

HARMONIOUS GROWTH

IN order to have a fair knowledge of spiritual growth we must call attention to the fact that it is a harmonious growth.

Every one knows what that means.

When a plant or a human body has an equal growth in all its parts the growth is harmonious. If one part or one member falls behind in growth there is an aberation, which, if serious, breaks the harmonious development of plant or body, and can even cause a grotesque appearance.

In the same way our spiritual growth should affect the faculties of our soul in equal measure. We should ever be on our guard against one-sided development in our spiritual life. Sin has darkened the light of the mind, has corrupted the feelings of the heart, and twisted the will in the wrong direction. Therefore the grace of God, given through the Holy Spirit, will have to affect all three domains of our soul in an equal measure, and restore what sin has undone, if we are to be children of God who inwardly and outwardly enjoy a harmonious growth.

Let us first mention the light of the mind.

Naturally we are speaking in this connection of spiritual knowledge, which is something quite different from mere mental knowledge. With natural knowledge there is ever a gap between us and that which we know. There is no intimate union between the man who knows, and the thing he knows. We are always cool and critical over against the object of our investigation, even though it is the truth of God as revealed in Holy Scripture.

But spiritual knowledge is identical with the life of the soul in fellowship with the Lord. Jesus tells us this in His Highpriestly prayer: "This is LIFE eternal that men might KNOW thee the one true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou didst send." This spiritual knowledge is experiential in character. The natural mind has so little in common with it, that Jesus thanked the Father that He had hid the heavenly things from the wise and prudent, and had revealed them to the babes, or ordinary folk. Many a learned man has no knowledge of the truth in an experiential way, while many a day-laborer of little learning, but of great faith, excels in spiritual knowledge.

This knowledge is given us by the Holy Spirit. And if there is spiritual growth then our experiential knowledge gradually becomes deeper and

richer, much as Jesus said that Nathanael would experience when he would see greater things in the future than he at first beheld. As we ripen in grace we learn to discern better between good and evil. We now see better than before the first beginnings of sin in our hearts. The more we grow in grace the more we become conscious of sin and guilt. When the lamp of our spiritual knowledge burns brightly we see many blemishes that we had not noticed while we lived in the twilight. And, praise God, we also have a much better knowledge of the all-sufficiency of God's grace in Jesus Christ. That keeps us in spiritual balance. Though the consciousness of guilt increases as we grow in grace, the knowledge of faith is enriched in an equal measure. The grace which we but dared to touch with our finger tips when we first turned to the Lord, now is become a prize possession, an eternal heritage, that can not be taken away. We come to the assurance of faith, and say in the jubilant language of Paul: "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!"

Our affections must also grow.

To love God above all, and our neighbor as ourselves, seems to be an impossible ideal, even though men may speak ever so glibly about it. The love of our heart is divided among many persons and things. It takes great energy to make our love to father and mother, relatives and friends, home and possessions, knowledge and art, subservient to our love of God, if this is to be more than some pious sentiment, and is to be transformed in deeds. Jesus knew how the hearts of His disciples kept wavering between two worlds, instead of surrendering to God altogether. But no one can serve two masters, and therefore we may thank the Lord that He causes our spiritual life to grow, and teaches us to make everything, yea, everything, subservient to Him and His blessed Son.

No bride accepts a bridegroom who gives her but half his heart. It is an insult to God to give Him but half of our love. All or nothing, is the Divine dictum. And if we are tested with this awful truth, then the noblest among us is but a child in the kingdom of heaven. It is a miracle of grace that the Lord will accept us in spite of our half-hearted service. He does this because he knows how weak our strength is, and how small our courage. And He also knows that in fellowship with Him the smallest flame of love will become a burn-

ing heart, that counts all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord.

When we notice this growth in the children of God we see a work of heavenly beauty. The course of our heart runs to the Lord amid all the anxieties and temptations of life. There is an increasing love for the Scriptures, and a thirst as that of the panting heart after the courts of God. There is a growing impulse to prayer, to secret fellowship with God. Then we live close to the Lord, instead of always wandering away. Then we are conscious of our dependence on Him, and trust Him to supply all our need. These are so many expressions of the love which the Holy Spirit has shed abroad in our cold hearts.

Blessed is the man who knows these things from experience.

But then we must also sanctify our will unto God.

When the spring of our will, by which our moral life is ruled, has been bent by the Holy Spirit in the right direction, it will often spring back into its old position. At least, there is still that inclination. For that reason the renewed will must be daily strengthened, if there is to be spiritual growth.

This actually takes place. The Lord our God continually strengthens our will power, so that we can walk in the way of righteousness. The will of the unregenerated man is unable of itself to do any good, and is inclined to all evil. The regenerated will is at first weak, and inclined to surrender to temptation, because sin always finds a powerful ally in our flesh. The flesh still dwells with the children of God, even though it no longer rules completely over them. But as we grow in grace, the Lord strengthens our weak will. Through that grace we can check the evil that still dwells in us, even though we may not be able to eradicate it.

In addition to this we are enabled to resist unto blood the evil that comes to us from without. But such a struggle has only negative results. When we fight against sin, and flee from evil, we are also to strive for that which is good. We are to live according to the commandments of God. Whoever has accepted the Lord Jesus Christ feels impelled to walk in Him, to be rooted and builded in Him, and to be established in the faith. Though at first this may be a halting walk, our weak knees are strengthened as we grow in spiritual power. More and more we are convinced that God's commandments are not grievous. Indeed, they become sweet songs to us as we go through our pilgrimage, if we

but remember to pray: "Establish my footsteps in thy word; and let not any inquity have dominion over me." Ps. 119:133.

In this way the grace of God causes a harmonious growth of our spiritual life. The final purpose is, of course, perfection. Christ has said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven, is perfect." Many have dreamed that this perfection could be attained in our present earthly life. But that is self-deception. We remain sinners till our latest breath. Only at death do we die unto sin altogether. There will therefore be a struggle to the end of this life. But in that struggle, and through that struggle, we will grow spiritually. Though in this life the ideal of perfection may remain beyond us, it will be realized in eternity. And what is such a great comfort, our Lord looks upon us here and now, as we one day shall be. He judges us to be perfect, but then, perfect in Jesus Christ.

Obstructed Growth

XX

OBSTRUCTED GROWTH

THE harmonious growth of which we have written in a previous chapter is not always equally steady, even though we make diligent use of the means of grace. Sometimes the most favorable conditions may be present in the field of the farmer, in the garden of the amateur, or in nature in its wild state. The soil is excellent, the air pure, the sun shines, and the rain comes on time. And yet in spite of such favorable conditions the plants fail to flourish.

Then there must be certain hindrances. Some are easily discovered. There may be insects nestling in leaf and twig, or worms gnawing at the roots, causing the plants to wither.

There are also such obstructions to spiritual growth.

We could not expect life to be otherwise.

When the believers have been transplanted into the kingdom of Grace, the ties that bind them to the world are not completely severed. Though our inner man may be separated from the world, our outward life is yet in the teeming world of men.

We can not as monks separate from the world. In the world we have a task to fulfill. God has given us a Divine calling. And as we do our daily work we can glorify the name of God by our confession and conduct.

The believers are still to a certain extent the children of their times. They are subject, be it in a modified way, to the influences that proceed from the great world around them. They will have to examine these influences carefully, and try the spirits, whether they are from God. But that does not take away the fact that they, as well as the unconverted, are exposed to the influences of the world.

And what is the spirit of the world in general? In our demoralized times it does not exert an elevating power that strengthens spiritual life, or even keeps it on the same level. We can rather speak of degenerating influences that threaten to lower the finest spiritual life. Though we may have an open eye for the dangers that threaten us, and are ever on our guard, we are unconsciously infected by the spirit of the age. While we at first walk on a road that gradually ascends, we later walk on a road that is on one level with the morals of the times, and may even begin a gradual descent. When we live in a period of general spiritual and

moral decline, it is not easy to keep our Christian life pure. Unless we redouble our prayers we must needs sink with a sinking world, and will not be able to walk on the waves as on solid ground.

In addition to the spirit of the times we would mention the material interests that absorb the mind. It is indeed true that we should keep our spiritual life high in the midst of all circumstances. But it can not be disputed that the demands of daily life often hinder our spiritual development. Jesus has spoken of the good seed that was choked among the thorns. And He Himself has explained the figure for us. The thorns are the cares for our daily bread. They are also the deceptiveness of riches. Or they are the joy of possession. These are so many thorns that choke the good in us. They hinder the quiet development of our spiritual life. The man who must always struggle to keep his head above water, lapses into spiritual bondage, even though he may by grace call himself a child of God. And he who has abundance so that he can live in luxury without having any care for daily bread, must not think that he is in the best condition to flourish in the kingdom of God. His riches can be a snare to him. Then head and heart are, alas, too busy with material things. Quite often the desire to increase one's

earthly possessions becomes over-mastering, while the spiritual needs are neglected. We are not always alive to the serious question of Christ: "What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

When we are kept from both extremes we are fortunate indeed. Experience proves that spiritual life comes to its best development in the middle class. In the churches we find as a rule neither the very rich nor the very poor, but those who have an average income. Their spiritual needs are more readily met. They are free from the crushing weight of poverty and the exhausting demands of riches. The words of Agur are pregnant with wisdom: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me."

There is still a third factor that is dangerous. We are all subject to the judgment of our fellow man. This judgment can be beneficial, since it may show us our shortcomings, and be an incentive to self-purification.

But that is not always the case. If we are praised instead of condemned, even though what is said may be perfectly true according to our human standards, a grave danger threatens our spiritual welfare. The man who is known in a larger or

smaller circle of friends as a man of piety, or as one who has an unusual insight into the Word of God, is in need of great grace if he is not to shrivel spiritually. The danger is not imaginary that such a man rests on his laurels, and neglects to nourish his spiritual life. The thought comes creeping through our minds that if every one thinks us so exceptional, we must be standing as fast as a mountain in our faith, and not be subject to any wavering. Deceitful is the heart above all things. Who can know it?

It may be that the reputation we had was at first in harmony with the truth and our inner experience. But intoxicated with the incense of our friends, we give but little heed to ourselves. It may be that we are more loud than ever in our testimony for the Name of God. We may be working harder than ever for the extension of God's Kingdom. We may be fighting for the welfare of the church. But in the meanwhile we are decaying spiritually. The fig tree is in full bloom. But there are no fruits!

And this brings us to an evil influence that underlies all the disturbing factors of which we have spoken. We refer to the subtile, destructive work of the prince of darkness.

We know indeed that in principle Christ has

crushed the head of the old serpent on the cross. Yet is remains true that his power is not completely broken. We must not think that the Evil One works only in an unholy world. He still attacks the children of God at every turn. He even attacked the Christ Himself with a threefold temptation. He urged a Simon Peter to deny His Lord. He sifted him as the wheat with the other apostles. He entered into a Judas to deny the Christ. How should we then be free from his demonic attacks?

This should not surprise us.

The children of the world place themselves consciously or unconsciously under Satan's inspiration. He controls their thoughts and desires. He guides their life and finds no resistance.

The children of God are redeemed from his power by grace however. That makes them his opponents from principle. They threaten the extension of his kingdom. And that explains why he develops all his powers against the church of Christ, and against the individual believers, as he has also done against their Head.

He attacks them in many ways.

He knows the weak spot in their hearts. This he attacks because they will then succumb the easier. He tells the one that he is altogether unworthy of the grace of God, and that he must not imagine that he is a chosen saint. It is all self-deception on

his part, says Satan, adding that we will always be disappointed with a grace that we claim, but which is not ours in fact. He fills another with depression because he has so little growth in grace. Satan whispers that all his prayers are futile, since the unholy desires of sin are still so rampant in his soul. And Satan tantalizes another with doubts, so that he loses his childlike confidence in the Lord. In such ways he sends his fiery darts against the believers, and he exults when their arm loses its vigor, and their shield sinks to the ground.

Sad to say, these attacks of Satan easily find an opening in our own hearts. Were we perfectly holy his weapons would not wound us. But though the beginnings of holiness have been wrought in our hearts, the flesh is still with us, and our sinful flesh aids Satan and fights God. Though the spirit be willing the flesh is weak. But sin may not gain the mastery over us. We must watch and pray. Otherwise the hindered growth will result in a positive decline in grace, against which the Scriptures warn us so earnestly.

Let us guard ourselves against this snare. If our spiritual capital does not constantly increase, but remains what it is, it may be a sign of spiritual bankruptcy. We must advance, or retrogression begins.

Falling From Grace

XXI

FALLING FROM GRACE

IN the foregoing chapter we have mentioned some factors which hinder the growth of our spiritual life. Naturally this leads us to speak of falling from grace, a condition against which we are warned again and again in the Word of God.

This falling from grace must not be confused with the loss of grace. We may quietly trust that if we have become the possession of Jesus Christ through the grace of God we will remain such forever. There is no permanent falling away of the saints.

For our salvation is not dependent on the brittle, flaxen thread of our own choice, but on the unchangeable will of God, who does not let any man go into perdition, whom He has saved by His almighty hand. The assurance that our salvation shall one day be crowned with glory and honor is not dependent on our steadfastness and faithfulness, but on the preserving grace of the Lord. He not only keeps the imperishable inheritance for His saints, but also keeps them amid all the strug-

gles of life for their inheritance. He is ever faithful who hath promised.

This is an encouraging message.

But that does not mean that we are altogether immune from falling from grace. For some time, either brief or long, we may slip. And we can not but condemn the overweening pride of those who make light of sin, and when they fall, instantly say: "once saved, saved forever." The epistle to the Hebrews is very instructive in this case. It warns all who easily condone their sins that they must walk in fear and trembling, if they do not want their judgment to be made the heavier. In many places this epistle urges the believers not to relax, but to take heed to themselves and others. It compares the Christian life to a running in the race course, which demands all our energies. Such an admonition we find in the words: "Follow after peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord: looking carefully lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby the many be defiled." (12:14, 15).

What does this falling short mean?

It must not be identified with some sudden stumbling, or even with an unexpected and griev-

ous sin, though these may lead to it. In many ways we all offend daily. The noblest Christian may be surprised by sin so that he is in the meshes of satan before he is aware of it.

Of course, such unrighteousness also makes us guilty before God. But if this slipping does not become a falling back from grace, the broken heart will at once turn in penitence to Christ, and will at once find forgiveness with Him. Then we fell suddenly, and just as quickly rise. We have Simon Peter as an example. He thrice denied his Lord. But, conscience-stricken with the glance of Jesus, he went out weeping bitterly, and soon after was restored again.

Bitter though such a fall in sin may be it is by no means as serious as falling back from grace. When we fall from grace our whole spiritual life is set back in all its manifestations and activities. All our spiritual powers are gradually paralyzed, something like the man with the withered arm, who still had his arm, but found it useless. The grace of God has not been taken away from those who fall back, but its power is diminished. Their prayers are no longer the energetic expression of their souls, but have become the patter of pious phrases. The fight against sin has become little more than a sham battle. The Word of God has

lost its taste, and the communion of the saints no longer allures. They no longer instinctively shudder at sin because their conscience slumbers. Faith is no longer a rejuvenating power. It lacks energy, and has become frozen capital, which no longer profits life. There is hardly any feeling of guilt any more. They that fall back from grace are in a condition of spiritual numbness. All is darkness within because the light of the Spirit has been hid under a bushel.

This gradual decay is a painful sight.

In the Bible we find some striking examples, which are so many warnings against falling back from grace.

Just think of the example of Samson.

The beginning of his life was very promising for the Kingdom of God. His exceptional strength was a gift of God to be used in conquering the enemies of God's people and was inseparably united with his inviolability as a Nazarite. As a hero of God he attacked his adversaries. His efforts were crowned with blessings from on high witness his triumphant shout: "With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of an ass have I smitten a thousand men!"

But the rest of his life was less inspiring. That mighty man of God wilfully gambled away his

gigantic strength on the lap of Delilah. His was a complete collapse without being conscious of it. When, after dallying with Delilah and the Philistines, he again tries to break his bands, we read the touching words: "But he KNEW NOT that Jehovah was departed from him."

Solomon is another example.

The beginning of his career was very inspiring. His prayer for wisdom for his royal office, when he might have asked for so many other things, creates a reverent admiration. It was no small matter to be worthy to ascend the throne as a type of the great Prince of peace. And what a treasure of practical wisdom has he not left behind in his Proverbs. Yet this great king of Israel had so fallen back from the grace of God through the influence of strange women, that he left the worship of the living God for the service of idols. Who would have expected that of a king who began as temple-builder? Of him as well as of Samson we may mourn: "How are the mighty fallen!"

We may believe that Solomon humbled himself before the Lord and repented before his death. In his Ecclesiastes, if he is the writer, he no doubt records his own experiences when he says that life without God, though rich in the joys of the world, is nothing but vanity. In the end he could find

joy only in the fear of the Lord: "Fear God, and keep his commandments."

Nor did Samson fall from grace forever.

His hair began to grow as a symbol of returning vigor. At his prayer the Lord strengthened him anew, so that he could pull down the pillars of Dagon's temple and destroy more Philistines in his death than during his whole life.

But though because of the unchangeable grace of God all ended well for these two men who had fallen back from grace, who does not know that their spiritual collapse had terrible effects? Sightless Samson, grinding in the prison-house, is a sad sight compared to the hero who killed lions without even talking about his feats at home. And the writer who laments in Ecclesiastes is a poor figure compared to the king who sought the good of his people. What a remorse must have consumed him when he saw that the seeds of idolatry which he had sown with such prodigal hand grew up so luxuriantly in Israel, and that his apostasy was the cause of the division of the kingdom after his death.

Let no man think, therefore, that a temporary back-sliding means but little since the grace of God will make all things well in the end. The damage is incalculable for ourselves. We can have joy nor

peace as long as we are denied the gracious fellowship of the Lord. Nor can we estimate the damage we do to our community when we fall back from grace. We no longer let our light shine. Instead, we sow the seeds of destruction from which an awful harvest must come.

We must fear even the slightest retrogression.

As soon as we notice any indifference about heavenly things, so that the Word of the glorified Christ to the church of Ephesus can be applied to us: "But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love," an investigation of the causes of this ebb in our spiritual life becomes a matter of first importance.

Usually we will find that the cause is some sin that we do not fight against. Often it will, as with Samson and Solomon, be some sensual evil. This has a tyrannical power over many. But whatever evil it may be, we may not succumb to it. We must resist unto blood. We must fight on our knees, for our own strength is insufficient in the struggle against sin.

Watch and pray, be our motto.

Watching, to see the approach of evil from afar, and then arm ourselves at once, and resist the enemy in the strength of the Lord.

Prayerful watching is the first requisite.

And then a diligent use of the means of grace which the Lord has ordained for our spiritual growth.

Humanly speaking it is far easier in this way to avoid back-sliding than to stop it after it has once begun.

But even though back-sliding has begun, and the thermometer of your spiritual life registers a subnormal condition, this may not be a reason for you to despair of being restored to the favor of God. You may not become discouraged and consider all lost. For if there has been a grain of grace in your soul the Lord will not let go the work of his hands. He will turn to you again in the way of penitence and prayer. Discouragement will consume whatever spiritual power is still left. Therefore, though matters seem hopeless, listen to the admonition: "Lift up the hands that hang down, and the palsied knees; and make straight paths for your feet, that that which is lame be not turned out of the way, but rather be healed."

In that way spiritual retrogression will stop and a gradual spiritual advance will take its place. Then you will press toward the goal set before you: the crown of righteousness and eternal life.

From Glory to Glory

XXII

FROM GLORY TO GLORY

WE may not end this little volume on spiritual growth without considering the demand for a steady development in spiritual life. This development is in direct contrast to the decay of which we have written in the previous chapter. As the people of Israel, after being delivered from the oppression in Egypt, were to advance day by day on the way to their goal, the land of Canaan, so we also must make a steady advance on the way to perfection. The longer we are on the way of eternal life, the nearer we are to be to our ideal!

Is this indeed a DEMAND?

No. Thank God! it is a PROMISE.

In the third chapter of Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians you can read of this. There the apostle writes about himself and all believers: "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit."

For our purpose it makes no difference whether we must think with the later expositors that we

ourselves are the mirror that reflects the glory of the Lord, or whether we must think as the older expositors that the mirror is the Gospel. In both cases the apostle declares the truth that through the Spirit of the Lord there is a continual change in the true believers. They advance from glory to glory.

We have therefore the promise of continual growth.

But is this not contrary to experience?

We hear many a Christian complain over his lack of visible advance. They feel that they are making no progress at all. Even though we have the honest conviction that we have a place among the runners in the Christian race-course, as far as our feelings are concerned we seem to be but spectators instead of one of those who is nearing the goal with swift steps. The crown still beckons with all its glory. But the distance that separates us from the crown does not seem to diminish. How can a believing disciple harmonize this with the promise of the Lord?

This is an anxious question for an anxious heart.

What shall we answer?

If there is ACTUAL stagnation or retrogression with a believer he will soon be aware of it himself, and he will easily be able to find its cause

within himself. According to what we have shown in the previous chapter there must be some moral defect which he must remedy. But besides an actual stagnation there is also an imaginary one. And this often causes disquiet to the upright in heart. But this anxiety will depart of its own accord since it leads us to earnest prayer. Such will be the result at least, if we look upon our painful experiences in the light of the Bible.

In nature the beautiful summer months make place for the winter seasons. When the trees are in full foliage they are pictures of an exuberant life that delights the eye. But in the winter seasons they look altogether different with their naked branches. All external splendor is gone. This seems to be a tremendous loss. But we know that this retrogression is only a matter of appearances. For the time being the life giving sap that pulsated in leaf and twig has withdrawn itself in bole and branches. The sap is still there, but is concentrated for the time being, and will expand with the coming of spring. Though the tree seems dead it nevertheless grows. It becomes more firm, and will soon be able to withstand any storm, since its roots are being more firmly anchored in the earth than ever.

Such times of concentration also occur in spiritual life. Who looks only at appearances thinks the

Christian has become moribund. It even seems so for our own consciousness. We do not seem to have the power for service. We are not very busy in the kingdom of God. Our zeal seems to slacken. Yet there may be quiet, inward growth. In those periods of rest our convictions are deepened. Our secret prayers become more devout. Our consciousness of guilt becomes more keen. Though we appear to decline externally, internally we ripen.

It is not loss, but gain, when there is a period of rest as far as appearances are concerned. Such was the case with Israel on the way to Canaan. The Israelites did not hurry from one day to the other. Again and again there was a pause to renew their strength. The cloudy pillar would come to a standstill, and camp would be made. These periods of rest were necessary, or the people would have succumbed. The impatient among them would no doubt desire to hurry on without any break, and take the shortest route. But the Lord deemed it better to lead his people to their destination with many a pause, and in a roundabout way.

What seems to us to be stagnation or even retrogression may not be such in fact. The Lord often wants us to examine ourselves. And if such examination makes our inward life deeper and purer, then the seeming retrogression is an actual advance.

We would add another remark.

Some upright believers will complain about themselves because they compare themselves with others. In nature there are plants that grow very rapidly and in a short time are in full bloom. But there are others of slow growth. These need much more time to come to their full development. That is also true in the realm of grace, as it is also true of the natural life of man. Some men are mature at the age of twenty. Others must wait till they are thirty or forty before they reach their full development. Must we be surprised then that the same differences are seen in spiritual life?

Every personality is unique.

Each develops slowly or rapidly according to its nature. If we are true believers there is no reason to doubt our spiritual growth because it is slower than that of others. As a rule we may say that an unusually rapid growth is not the best guarantee for the future. A slower growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord is often better. Sometimes children that grow rapidly bring disappointment, while those of slow growth become muscular men.

Finally we want to mention the undeniable fact that there are grades in grace, different degrees in the spiritual life of God's children. We may

not demand the same measure of spiritual development for each child.

The grace they receive is of course the same in each case. There is but ONE faith, ONE hope, ONE love, ONE trust in the ransom for all, just as there is but ONE name given under heaven whereby we must be saved. But that does not mean that all have an equally clear insight into Scripture, equal powers of prayer, and equal boldness in testifying. The one will always be ahead of the other, since the Creator has given one five, another two, and another but one talent. We cannot erase these differences. Grace takes the work of creation as it is and sanctifies it. A rich mind or a poor one, a speculative or practical one, stays the same even under the domain of grace. Each child of God will therefore develop according to his innate qualities.

But within those limits spiritual growth increases "from glory to glory". Who once as a Nathanael has confessed Christ as King will also receive for his own soul life the promise: "Thou shalt see greater things than these." It is the promise of continual increase. If you have the traits of a child of God these will no doubt develop. The child becomes a man. The Spirit of the Lord never rests from His work. He is ever busy trans-

forming you after the image of Christ. But let us watch that we do not quench or grieve the Spirit.

We are therefore in safe hands. The great Artist is ever chiseling, that we may one day be like the image of his Son. Surrender to Him. He cares for you. He will not stop till you, full-grown, can appear before God in Zion without spot and without wrinkle.

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Do you believe in the devil said one girl to another no said one it is just like Santa Claus it is your father.

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